across the river acheron

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by raquine

Summary

> “It’s natural to feel uncomfortable—Jack Crawford has displaced you once again. A change of environment is startling for anyone, but especially for you in these circumstances. I’m your psychiatrist, after all.”
>
> “Changing my environment for Dr. Lecter.” Will laughs dryly. “You should hope I don’t go wandering in my sleep.”

To catch an elusive killer, Hannibal and encephalitis-ridden Will must stage a romantic relationship. Naturally, Hannibal plans to take advantage of this in every way he can.

walk into my parlour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"And you," Will repeats, tasting the acidity of each word, "want us to date."

Hannibal studies Will. He is feverish today, a waxy sheen coating his complexion. This close, the stench of sickness is faintly cloying, a humid simmer beneath skin. His curls are wilder too, damp at the roots, and his hands shake and quiver—yet Jack remains deliberately obtuse. Disguising negligence as utilitarianism.

"You're not actually dating," Jack replies, holding Will's gaze. A purposeful assault of eye contact. Preying on Will's vulnerabilities.

"But you want us to *act* like it. You want us living in the same house, going to the same places."

His hostility is hardly surprising. For Will, dating itself is an agonising affair that requires an open heart, the highest degree of trust and intimacy—but feigned romance with his psychiatrist? Hannibal has been fostering trust for months now, nourishing himself as the root of safety, of stability, but this is a drastic and startling jump. Obscene, even.

Still, Hannibal hungers.

It is a bizarre concept, but to be with Will most hours of the day grants infinite chances to peer into cracks, run fingers along the splinters of his psyche—not to mention easier access to minor unorthodoxy.

His curiosity is insatiable and ravenous. It begs to be fed.

"Why not? You know each other, and you both fit the profile. Dr. Lecter can help you if you feel…" Jack gestures loosely. "You know. Unstable, or… I don't know. Doctor, weigh in here?"

It is bewildering how Jack expects him to side with anyone here but his patient, his charge. As if the lives of passing strangers hold more value than Will, the man with a mind like kyawthuite. His rarity, his superiority.

The desire to possess, to conquer, to build Will universes in a gilded cage—it seizes him, only momentarily. A fleeting stab of impulse.

"I am strictly against any situation Will feels uncomfortable with," he says instead, smooth as a blade unsheathing. Jack tightens his jaw.

"Look, I understand that, but there is really no need to feel uncomfortable."

"That's for Will to decide."

Will loosens by a fraction, throwing Hannibal a strained half-smile—but he isn't done here. As always, opposing Jack only makes him push harder, spewing unethicality until the guilt makes Will buckle, curling up soft and malleable in his hands. Many thanks to Uncle Jack and his double-edged penchant for manipulation.

"Will, listen to me," he begins. "Do you know how many men this guy has killed? He's in hiding and he needs to be lured out, or he's going to kill more. You know this."

"Dr. Lecter isn't FBI," Will hisses, and Hannibal smothers passive delight. He likes it when Will is protective. It is a pure, cutting sensation; the flavour of achieving a goal or cultivating a delicacy, mixed in with the rich warmth of endearment. "He shouldn't be involved in this. It's dangerous."

"Dr. Lecter?"

A pause, to build anticipation. Then he speaks.

"As long as there is FBI enforcement, I am comfortable with it." Will buries a flinch, eyes wide and doe-like behind his glasses, his barrier. Hannibal holds his gaze. "But I must remind you: this is Will's decision to make. His opinion is priority here, Jack."

Silence, only for a moment. Will resumes restlessness, pacing back and forth with clammy hands, unsteady feet. Encephalitis has sunk teeth into his motor skills.

"I can't just *date* someone for a case." He spins on his heel, almost drunkenly. Jack doesn't notice. "Sorry, uh, no offence, Dr. Lecter. It's not… I just can't, it's too—"

"I understand, Will. No need for apologies." At this, Will's pace slows. He must be unconsciously coaxed into this; it won't work unless he believes agreeing is a personal decision, because Will is stubborn and leans on self-deception—has leaned on it for years. For his entire life, perhaps.

"Will." Jack leans forward, hands in a steeple. "Men are being killed, mutilated. Their hearts are being *impaled*. Without you, that is going to keep on happening."

Hannibal wrinkles his nose. This 'Cupid' killer has been choosing unrelated homosexual couples to mutilate, slashing their bodies and piercing their hearts with arrows, hence the name. He might consider it artistic if the execution wasn't so sloppy. It lacks patience and precision; an attempt at the metaphorical that continuously falls short.

Still, he doubts these are hate crimes—they appear more like bitter scorn if anything. He has dealt with similar patients; obsessive lovers with hatred for the world, for those happier than them. Willing to commit atrocities to satiate their hate. A dreadfully dull premise for murder.

"Jack, I…"

Will's voice pulls him to the present, so Hannibal regards him with candid sincerity. *Whatever you do, I will follow*. An oath of loyalty. The promise to chew his heart with gentle teeth.

Still, he hesitates.

“It is your decision, Will,” Hannibal reminds him, thickening his voice with calculated warmth. He can hear ruin in the expanse of Will’s mind. Horrors and agonies, the knife’s edge of guilt slicing through the noise. Hannibal’s assurance, molten sunlight spilling into the dark.

Will stops pacing.

“This is seriously… I don’t know.” He inhales, pinches his fingers together. Exhales. “There needs to be limits. Boundaries.”

Victory.

Hannibal gleams.

“Well, I’m not the therapist here,” Jack says. “You two can sort that out yourselves. But I need to know: is it a yes? Are you agreeing to this?”

A drawn-out silence, the final contemplation—hardly any contemplation at all.

“Will?” Hannibal calls, only to ground him.

“Okay, fine. Fine.”

“Thank you!” Jack almost slams the table. For the second time today, Will suppresses a flinch.

Afternoon light is white and radiant, swathing the living room in sunny hues of winter. It catches in Will’s eyes, pools in the dip of his collar, highlights a small, pale scar under his jaw that rises and falls when he swallows.

“I can’t believe I’m actually doing this.” Will folds a shirt once, twice. “I don’t like it.”

Hannibal wanders closer, drinking in every detail of Will’s home. Even though this is the second time he has been here (other instances deftly omitted), he takes his time re-examining the quality of his cookware, the titles on the bookshelves. His taste in literature is expansive, ranging from niche non-fiction to modernist novels to bright, untouched poetry. There is nothing criminal, no forensic guides or murder mysteries. It seems Will is adamant about separating work from home. He doesn’t even own a computer.

“It’s natural to feel uncomfortable,” he says, refocusing. “Jack Crawford has displaced you once again. A change of environment is startling for anyone, but especially for you in these circumstances. I’m your psychiatrist, after all.”

“Changing my environment for Dr. Lecter.” Will laughs dryly. “You should hope I don’t go wandering in my sleep.”

Hannibal frowns with faux concern to stifle his mirth. To observe Will roaming wild in an unconscious state, completely disinhibited—the thought swells hot ripples of delight in his stomach.

“You are not obligated to do any of this, Will. I care more about your wellbeing than any case or killer.”

The words are calculated consolation, but Hannibal is surprised to find they glimmer with truth. Will continues folding clothes, hands steady.

“Who will if I won’t?” His surety lacks arrogance, only conviction. They both know the answer.

With no reasonable rebuttals, Hannibal sits down in surrender. Will’s bedroom is tidy but clustered, a quaint space that could look disorganised to a foreign eye despite being rather structured. On his bedside table lie stacks of books with worn covers and yellowed, crinkled edges—Will has an unfortunate habit of dog-earing—and a half-full bottle of whiskey. It is a unique choice to place alcohol where most keep water. Hannibal makes a mental note to pay closer attention the next time Will drinks.

The most intriguing thing is the bedroom itself, considering it isn’t one at all: he sleeps in the living room. Now is finally an acceptable time to raise that question.

“If I may ask,” Hannibal starts, “why do you sleep downstairs?”

Will presses firm fingers into his temple. “So I can see if anyone is outside. Maintain outdoor sight-lines at all times.”

His theory was correct then. Hannibal hums.

“Always on the lookout for predators. Always hypervigilant.”

“Always,” he echoes, zipping a rather small duffel bag. “I’m done packing.”

The house is quiet, spare for the low clicking of paws on wooden floor. Will watches his dogs and Hannibal watches Will—chapped lips, dark swatches under his eyes. Calloused fingers twirling a loose thread on his sleeve. Thoughts glittering like mist between them, a miasma of words unsaid.

“We need to talk about my dogs.” Will squats down, caressing the head of a small dog. Buster, he recalls.

Hannibal, while fond of animals, cannot abide the idea of any furry creature in his house. Stray hairs dusting furniture, obtrusions around food and the kitchen, muddy prints soiling clean carpet…

“I do prefer my home animal-free,” he says, petting the head of Will’s largest dog: a mixed breed with a white chest and brown coat.

“I don’t.” Will’s tone is both serious and light. “I want to take my dogs.”

“In my house?” Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

“Yes.”

“No.”

Will laughs, a short thing. “Okay. Not all of my dogs.”

“Is this a negotiation?”

“It’s a plea.” His eyes turn sly. “And a compromise—or I’m not doing this.”

“I have no personal interest in whether you do this. I’m helping Jack Crawford out of courtesy.”

A pause. Will meets his eyes, direct but fleeting. “Are you?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m doing this to catch the Cupid killer.”

Hannibal stifles a scoff at the name. “The killer. Would you like to discuss him?”

“No, no—not now.” Will shakes his head. “Can we save it for our session?”

“Of course.” Hannibal respects it, the careful arrangement of fragments and forts. Complete compartmentalisation. For Will, he can be a patient man. “But I believe we’ve strayed from the topic at hand.”

“One dog.” Will lowers his head, looking up through his lashes. Like a lamb.

Like something pretending to be a lamb.

For a moment, Hannibal sees a glimpse of something obscure and blurry, a wispy shadow of the future. He can feel it in his marrow. Scarce, fluttering remnants of something Will could become.

A nascent monster lives in Will, has made a home in his heart and lungs. Hannibal imagines tearing him apart, cruel claws in soft flesh, stretching through viscera to unlock what breathes there. Feel his horror. Find this monster; consume him whole.

“Only one dog,” Hannibal relents. “It is forbidden from the kitchen and upstairs, and you must clean up all the mess it makes. Every hair.”

Will’s expression breaks into something easy. Close to mischievous.

“Okay. Deal. Thank you,” he says, and it sounds like a promise.

“Who will you bring?” Hannibal inquires, scanning the animals. Will does the same.

“Winston.” The friendliest of his dogs, its ears perk up, approaching Will.

“I’m fond of Winston. Why him?”

“He’s clingy.” Will ruffles his fur, eyes softening. “The others are happy with Alana if I’m away—she’s taken care of them before—but he’s still new, and really attached. Got to keep an eye on him.”

A flash of irritation, mild but grating. “Alana Bloom will be looking after them?”

Will frowns. His lips tilt downwards, almost theatrically.

“I have to ask. She usually doesn’t mind, but since, uh… You know.”

Cordiality has been stiff between them since the kiss. Hannibal is grateful for it.

“I understand. Let’s hope Alana is feeling generous.”

“Let’s.” Will exhales the word.

Time stretches and coils during the drive, reality suspended in hazy quietude. Winter is coarse and brutal, the snowfall of January’s dusk slinking into February’s dawn, and glittering flakes dust the windshield. Hannibal has always hated the snow. Cold weather causes aching scars.

Will is visible in the rear view, driving rather slow in his car, and Hannibal wonders if that is due to the encephalitis, the awkward call he had with Alana, or simply reluctance to arrive and face what lies ahead.

He briefly imagines swerving the car, letting Will panic and crash into trees, into something. Stepping into the rubble and holding his head and neck, caressing with tender hands. Gaping eyes, salty tears. Then snapping. A crunch of bones, like footsteps in winter foliage.

Hannibal dismisses the thought.

Courteous as always, Will wipes his feet on the mat before entering then gently brushes gravel off Winston's. He treads with new inquisitiveness, mentally reframing Hannibal's home as his temporary own, reinterpreting the environment from a fresh lens. As always, the scrutiny brings a myriad of emotions.

"The guest room," Hannibal announces once they are upstairs.

Preparing this room was a fastidious process: the sheets and comforter are newly bought, a rich cotton similar in colour to Will's own, and the pillows from Italy, stuffed with goose feather. He considered velvet for the bedding but doubted Will would appreciate the texture.

Two books lie on the bedside table: a large volume of Shakespeare's notable works (the very copy Will owns, though it appears unread), and an untranslated edition of *La Vita Nuova*, Dante's collection of prose and poetry dedicated to his lover, Beatrice. A stunning piece of literature he hopes Will can appreciate.

"Wow." Will scans the room, quieter than usual. "It's nice—really nice. Thank you, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal soaks in the words, their authentic cadence. Will's sincerity is stardust in his veins.

"Of course."

"What's the painting?"

Will wanders to the gold-framed piece above the bed, another decision Hannibal lamented over.

"*El Perro*," he says, although the translation is unneeded, "*The Dog*, painted by Francisco Goya. I picked it with you in mind."

It is a small, bleak image. Painted in hues of deep brown and dirty ochre, it depicts the head of a dog gazing upwards, almost completely consumed by a sloping darkness below; drowning in an unidentical mass. A tale of imminent submersion.

Will is dubious.

"*The Dog*," he repeats. "The one painting I remind you of, out of every art piece you own, is called *The Dog*?"

"Yes."

Will snorts gently. "Your psychoanalysis skills are growing shallow, Doctor."

"I disagree. May I explain the context?"

Will settles on the bed, running a delicate hand along the cover. "Go ahead."

With muted glee, Hannibal continues.

“*The Dog* belongs to a collection of paintings by Francisco Goya: *Pinturas negras*, or the *Black Paintings.* Goya painted them on the walls of his house while late in life and deep in illness. All haunting, macabre pieces, they were never titled and likely were never intended for the public eye.”

Will scrunches his nose, gaze set on the painting. “How miserable. Ripped from his very walls?”

“Quite so.” A moment of silence—to deepen the mood. Then, he continues. “What comes to mind when you see this painting?”

“Futility,” Will replies in a beat. “The…ache of hopelessness. Of being washed away from the world, and quietly accepting it.”

Interesting.

“I see futility.” Hannibal lifts his head. “But I also see magnificence—the magnitude of sinking into yourself. Self-consumption in a way only you understand. The inevitability of being devoured by impulse, by instinct; submitting to your true nature.”

Will turns, studying him with quiet intensity, and once again Hannibal is seized with the sensation of being stripped to bone, skin flayed. He isn’t accustomed to being the recipient of analysis. The sensation is deliciously disarming, and Hannibal preens under the glow of Will’s scrutiny.

An age passes before Will shatters the silence, eyes searching.

“What are you submitting to, Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal tilts his head. “Nothing. I accepted my true self years ago. I would be a rather incompetent psychiatrist if I hadn't.”

He leans closer to Will. Coffee and mint in his breath. A stray eyelash on his cheek. Desire, red and sweltering; encephalitis sweet.

“Your interpretation makes me wonder, Will. What aren’t you submitting to?”

Will looks at Hannibal, then at the painting without a word. The conversation dims to a tense, thickening halt.

The hours between Will’s unpacking and his lectures at Quantico crawl by slowly. After attending two dull sessions with patients, completing weekly scheduling and reorganising his office, there is nothing left to do but wait, idle and impatient, for Will to arrive.

Time writhes. But then he is here, candied and mellow, like the winds of spring thaw.

“Tell me about this killer.”

Will’s pallor is worse beneath the office lighting, moist and wet like a wax figure. He always is sicker in the evenings; dozy, disoriented. Hannibal’s gut curls with vacancy, the ache of a chasm, of scarcity. The urge to destroy, to torture—push beyond every limit and boundary just to see if he crawls back, blood-slick and ravenous. Today, it overwhelms him.

Is it so wrong to kick the lamb, only to see if it rises stronger? To watch it retaliate; to feel it bite?

“He targets couples, as you know.” Will is pacing, uneven and hasty. “All homosexual men between thirty and fifty, one dark-haired, one light-haired. The first were at the opera, the second were watching ballet. He kills them on stage, mutilates the bodies.”

“Acts of prejudice?”

“No, no.” Will scrubs at his face. “He’s…yearning. It’s… It’s jealousy, the anger of unrequited love—or maybe the desperation for it. He’s finding ghosts in these places, in these men. This killer has been *betrayed* by love.”

Hannibal examines Will, glassy eyes and twitching fingers. He is hazier than usual tonight. Vulnerable. Hannibal wants to probe, poke; take advantage of bared flesh.

“Your killer is a romantic,” Hannibal muses. “Tell me, Will. How do you experience love?”

He laughs, a brittle thing.

“Love? A little forward, Doctor, considering our recent circumstances.”

Sharp-tongued as always. Hannibal stifles his pleasure.

“That may be your interpretation. It wasn’t mine.”

A pulse of silence, of tension.

“You first.” Will sinks into the chair. “Tell *me* about love, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal takes a moment to ponder.

In the cognitive sense, he understands love—he is a lover himself. Love is everywhere, nested in the breast of art and literature, woven between metronome beats and stretching stanzas, in the whirling sacrosanctity of theatre, of dance. Romance simmers in the sky and ether, in the beauty of birds and beasts and the slitting of skin, smashing of bones, the carnal thrill of consumption. Hannibal eats love for dinner. Beatrice, *La Vita Nuova*, devouring Dante’s flaming heart.

However, romance in the sense of intimate connection with another? He rejects it. Never has Hannibal met anyone who sparks passion, devotion; no one worthy of seeing him with open eyes.

It is not a lonely existence—unlike this killer, he does not yearn for love. It is likely nobody will understand Hannibal as long as he lives, perhaps even beyond that, and he is passively content with the fact. Love is a distant thing. It fits wrong under a suit.

Still, his gaze wanders to Will. He waits with patient expectancy, brilliance shining behind clouded eyes like moonlit silk spun from fog. A wound of promise and disaster.

It causes one to wonder.

“I have struggled with the concept,” Hannibal begins a careful blend of half-truths and obfuscations. “True love requires the purest form of honesty, compatibility and understanding. Without this, any relationship will fail regardless of intent. Unfortunately, these qualities were always absent in my previous relationships.”

Will considers this. “No one daring enough to climb your forts.”

“Perhaps not.” A pause, contemplating. “And you?”

Will breathes in, chuckling softly.

“I was never very good at love. So many obligations of trust, of…vulnerability. I’m too distant apparently, too… I don’t know.” He rubs his eyes. “And it’s hard to date when I’m always soaking up the other person’s emotions—everything gets blurry. I don’t know what feelings belong to them and what belong to me.”

“Your empathy is a barrier,” Hannibal observes.

“Not just my empathy. I’m the barrier.”

Hannibal drinks in the rarity of these confessions, the novelty of Will being open, raw. Despite his illness, he is beautifully introspective tonight. It is time to draw parallels with the latest killer, to provoke his empathy, see how he resonates. Disorient him, only a little. Only just enough.

“Your killer,” he begins, “is his love trapped behind barriers?”

“Yes,” Will replies in a beat, “and so is he. He wants to be in the embrace of someone unconditionally, endlessly loving, and these couples—they’re his fantasy in flesh. Proof of a world he can never get. He craves intimacy so badly it kills him.”

“Do you?”

Will stills for a moment, staring somewhere near Hannibal.

“Sometimes.”

Success.

Hannibal soaks victory on his tongue, watching as Will slips into thought, rubbing his legs and face and fingers—anything to ground himself. It is surprising how coherent he has been

so far, considering the languid crawl of his breathing, the damp beads on his forehead. Surely, he cannot last much longer.

True to the assumption, he doesn't.

It is the eventual lull in conversation that causes Will to lapse—Hannibal spots it in the droop of his eyelids, the slump of his shoulders. Gravity caving in.

"Will. Is everything alright?"

His eyelashes flutter as he collects his thoughts, like a small animal waking from slumber.

"I'm feeling drowsy." He is speaking slower, drawling, and there opportunity is, plump and ripe. "Didn't sleep."

"Have you experienced more sleepwalking, or lost time?"

"No—at least, I don't think so." Will's eyes dart around the room. "But who knows? My sleep is all wrong either way. The nightmares haven't stopped."

Hannibal takes a breath. The air is crisp and clean, sickness sizzling faintly beneath.

"May I offer a suggestion?" Will nods, so he continues. "Phototherapy. Are you familiar?"

"I've heard of it."

"It's a popular form of light therapy used to treat a multitude of conditions, including sleep and mood disorders. I believe it could alleviate your sleep problems, and possibly improve your mood, too."

He will agree to this—it is set in stone before any words are spoken. Will is desperate for assuagement and limp with trust.

After a long, drawn moment, he raises up his hands in shaky surrender. Hungry for a cure. "How does it work?"

Hannibal smiles with teeth. Will won't remember this tomorrow. A dose of scopolamine will ensure both disinhibition and total amnesia; like it did for their last session and the session before that. This conversation has occurred three times and still Will remains blissfully unaware, repeating similar words in different octaves. It is remarkable how the fatigued brain prioritises oblivion.

As always, Hannibal is gentle as Will convulses, gentle as he injects the needle, caressing marred skin with tender fingers. He talks him through the process, speaking loud and clear even as his eyes roll back, as his mind submerges. There is no need to cause Will unnecessary suffering. Hannibal would slice him open and catch the blood in cupped hands.

It is over quickly. Years of practice improve efficiency.

"Will?" He kneels before him, equipment cleared away. "Is everything alright?"

No response, but the seizure has concluded. These new living arrangements are hugely convenient—now there is no need for the ordeal of driving them home in Will's car, then taking a taxi back—he can simply drive Will to the manor, then walk through the back alleys to retrieve his own car. Once again, Hannibal is intensely grateful for choosing an office so close to his house.

"It's time to go home." Hannibal lifts Will up, one hand on his waist, another on his shoulder. "Come, Will."

Quivers tremble throughout his body but he can walk with Hannibal's guidance, blinking through half-lidded eyes. Hannibal whispers quiet reassurance, and though the stench of panic sweat and illness is appalling, it is a cloying, giddy sparkle that fills Hannibal bottom-up, his ever-expanding fondness for Will.

His curiosity has an immeasurable appetite, but time with Will is always a worthy fill.

"Careful, now."

Will is mumbling as he crumbles into the passenger seat, dozy and incoherent. Hannibal places a hand on his head, brushes back soaked curls, and the temptation to kiss his forehead like a lamb purrs in his gut, sweet and heady.

There is such remarkable beauty in him, cradled in the arch of his nose, the slope of his jaw. But no—the time is not right for affection, for softness and warmth.

Right now, it is simply time to go home.

Chapter End Notes

hi! thank you for reading

cant believe i finally committed to a chapter fic... i have most of this written and will be posting regular updates every wednesday & sunday :) hope you enjoy

never the twain shall meet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Breakfast is Hannibal's first attempt at New Orleans cuisine: Eggs Hussarde. A valiant effort from his own eye, but Will's judgement will be the true determinative. When he wakes it is freshly cooked, simmering low in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Will."

In the dim of morning, his frame is hazy and sunlit. He is wearing the robe Hannibal left for him—a perfect fit, though Will wears it with humility, hunched shoulders and crossed arms; perhaps startled by the intimacy of all this. Hannibal glows at the sight.

Closer, his demeanour is stiff, shrunken. How much can he remember from last night, yesterday evening? Waking up in a new house with scarce memories is frightening—it's likely been years since Will has spent the night in someone else's home for anything other than work.

Although, he reminds himself, this is for work.

It is.

Yesterday night, a heavenly haze spent with a hand at Will's waist, guiding him up the stairs and into bed; his bed. He was sluggish and sightless, sinking into every touch, every fingertip. Hannibal had leaned close—a surge of temptation, pulled back by waves of logic, rationale. Not now. Not like this.

Perhaps not ever. Endearment is a faint and fleeting thing.

"Good morning," he mumbles, voice thick from sleep. Hannibal watches him with fervency.

Even with frost running rampant outside, heatless sun spills into the kitchen, a loose halo draped over Will. It illuminates dried crust in his eyes, torn skin on his lips, like a sight shattered from stained glass. Apostolic.

Hannibal sniffs. The world smells of black coffee and fresh eggs, morning breath and buried sickness, yet something else touches Will, richly clean and pure. He has washed with Hannibal's soap.

A throb in Hannibal's chest. Light, evanescent. Abnormal.

"Would you like breakfast? Coffee?"

Lethargic, Will presses into his eyes. "No breakfast yet. I get nauseous in the morning. But coffee would be great, please."

“Of course.” Hannibal catalogues this.

There is an endlessly expanding file on Will stored in his mind palace, and every discovery crowds another page. It would take decades to unlock the crypt of Will’s psyche—likely impossible even then—but Hannibal can still try. There is art in perseverance.

“Breakfast should stay warm for a while. I’ll join you in the dining room.”

In the privacy of his kitchen, Hannibal stirs Will’s coffee and contemplates domesticity, the stench of it in the air. He is accustomed to having lovers overnight, dutifully providing aftercare and affection, this doting partner farce.

But with Will?

Everything is different. Will is not a lover in the slightest, spare for the fabricated romance they must spin this week. It is psychiatrist habit to intellectualise emotions instead of processing them, and while Hannibal rarely falls into this trap, today his perception is blurry. The world is cold. This is something he hasn’t accounted for.

Briefly, he considers slipping a knife under his sleeve—carving into blood vessels, life spilling hot and arterial from Will’s carotid. Breathing his name into the abyss left behind, that ripe concave of flesh.

No. Killing Will serves no purpose, not yet. Not after all this effort. Not before he finishes what he set out to do.

“You look exhausted.” Hannibal enters the dining room. Winston lays under his chair, yawning and obedient. “Trouble in your dreams?”

Reaching for the coffee, Will avoids his eyes. “Thank you,” he murmurs, before taking a long, silent sip. “I, um—yes. I think so.”

“You aren’t certain.”

“Certain? No. I don’t…” Will hesitates. “I don’t remember falling asleep. I don’t remember much of yesterday at all, actually.”

A predictable outcome. Sheepish and awkward, Will half-smiles and it masks nothing. Still, Hannibal is curious if any memories have slipped through the cracks.

“You lost time.” Hannibal frowns to hide his satisfaction. “What do you remember?”

Will’s fingers snake into his hair. “Not a lot. I don’t know what was dreaming and what was real.” His breath is slightly laboured. “Most of yesterday is fine—I remember the Cupid killer, and Jack and us agreeing to…this. My lectures are fuzzy, but they happened, I think. It’s our appointment where everything starts to blur.”

Hannibal mulls this over, ice thrumming in his veins. “Discussing both the killer and our change in relationship caused you to dissociate.”

“Our change in relationship?”

“We are to act as a couple for the week, Will. That is a startling transition from our previous relationship. It requires new boundaries.”

“Yes.” He cradles the cup. “I don’t know how to feel about that.”

“Wearing new skin for a week is no simple feat; this is unfamiliar even to me. Your discomfort is something we should discuss.”

Will stays silent. Permissive.

“I will never cross your boundaries or do anything to cause you disturbance. Staying with me is entirely your decision and Jack Crawford cannot force you to do anything against your wishes. You are my patient, Will, but most importantly my friend, and I won’t let him.”

His words settle with the quiet murmur of chirping birds, swaying trees. Hannibal listens to the rumble of passing cars and ponders truthfulness, the discerning amount buried in his speech.

When Will makes no move to reply, he continues, “What about this troubles you the most?”

After a beat, he says, “The vulnerability. I trust you, Dr. Lecter, but I can’t adapt to this like you can. I’m not used to…performance. I don’t know how to fake a relationship, act and pretend in a public space. Especially, uh. With another man.”

“Being with another man—this concerns you?”

Will shakes his head.

“No, not like that. It’s just not something I’ve ever done, or even thought about. I wouldn’t know how to, you know…” His voice crumbles. “You?”

“I choose not to dwell on labels of sexuality. To me, beauty in all forms is worthy of appreciation.”

A quiet hum, understanding. The air smells of minor confessions.

“You mentioned a dream-like state,” Hannibal recalls, still curious. “What exactly were you experiencing?”

A flicker of discomfort. Will rubs his arms, fingers sinking into the robe.

“I was dreaming of the stag. I was the Cupid killer and I was murdering a couple. Violently. Brutally…”

He breathes in, sharp. Hannibal waits.

“But the stag was all I could see. It was watching me kill. And then when I did, it approached me, cupped its hooves around my face like hands, but they were kind. Caressing. There was

a…warmth, and I sank into it but then it melted into blood, blood in my throat and lungs and everywhere, and I couldn't breathe."

With another inhale, he collects himself. "It felt so real. More real than my usual dreams. I can't explain it." Will glances side-long at Hannibal. "Did you hear anything?"

Crashing and slamming. Faint gasps vibrating through thick walls. A muted scream, muffled by fingers. The leaking fetor of panic, of perspiration.

"No," Hannibal lies.

"Good. I wouldn't want to disturb you."

"Your terror doesn't disturb me, Will." It rivets him. He wants to sculpt it into art like clay. "It's only something I wish to soothe."

Will doesn't reply, but his brows draw together in thought. Somewhere, the words have landed.

"Typically, your nightmare stag symbolises the relationship between you and your fears. They may be changing; or rather, evolving as you evolve. A blooming metamorphosis of the mind."

"Something is wrong," Will says eventually. "This isn't—this isn't like me. This isn't *normal* for me."

"Jack Crawford is repeatedly placing you in triggering situations. Your mind is coping the only way it knows how to."

"It's not Jack doing that," he snorts. "I'm doing the placing. And anyway, I can handle the cases, it's—it's fine. But I think there's more to this. I feel ill."

"Extreme mental trauma often manifests as physical illness in the body."

A bleak laugh. "Oh, great. Now it's extreme?"

"You know I have always believed in its extremity."

"Fair enough." Will half-smiles again, a pitiful thing. "Sorry, I didn't mean to talk that long. The breakfast. You must be starving."

"Never apologise for speaking your mind."

Hannibal stands up, watching Will fumble for a reply.

After a pause, he asks, "What are we having?"

"A dish I believe you may recognise."

When he brings it in, Will's face sparks with recognition.

“Oh, God. Wow. I used to have this all the time as a kid.”

“Eggs Hussarde,” Hannibal says, rather proud. “Your first breakfast in my home should have positive associations. Considering your recent troubles, I hoped a nostalgic meal could help you relax. I also chose ingredients specifically with immune-boosting properties for your recent illness.”

Will softens, eyes crinkling around the edges.

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter. This is kind of you.”

“Of course.”

Unfortunately for Will, immune boosting is the last thing he needs—it will only accelerate his illness. Hannibal can be a cruel man, but if the circumstances call for it he will only hurt him gently, with soothing words and tender hands. With a home-cooked dish from happier days.

He will understand one day. When the time is right and fate is willing.

Following this train of thought, it is apparent, clear as day that he needs to reevaluate.

What does he want with Will?

He sees the caterpillar, starved and shrivelling inward and wants to guide it to chrysalis, feed it hymns. Will, the man suppressing such horror and beauty, a kaleidoscope of art and love and carnality. A heart like his own.

Then, of course there is his empathy. Pure, pietistic, an all-knowing and all-seeing force. Perhaps even capable of seeing Hannibal; worthy. God’s eye.

It’s a foreign feeling, this urge to be understood. Before Will, Hannibal was content living in his ‘person suit’, wearing fabric like skin. But now, something within him hungers. He wants Will to peel open his flesh, and for Will to peel his own too; undergo collective transformation. Burst open at the seams. It would be cruel permitting a life where Will never understands himself, the reason for the monotony of his days. This listless ennui. The festering rot of something being missing, and never knowing what.

He wants to be understood by Will and wants to understand him completely. See and be seen —the highest form of intimacy. Divinity. Hannibal is craving the blood of a deity.

Silently, he hungers. Silently, he yearns.

Then, Hannibal decides it is time to put today’s plan in motion.

“Jack Crawford wants us to start going out together today, correct?” Hannibal asks.

Will nods between a bite of egg.

“Allow me to take you to a symphony concert.”

He almost chokes on it.

“I go there often, though I haven’t had time as of late. Our killer has a taste for affluence—this would be a good starting point for our faux romance. It fits the profile, and I greatly enjoy it. You may too.”

Will blinks, wide and owlish, putting down his fork.

“Dr. Lecter is asking me on a date.”

“I suppose so.” He smiles, a blithe thing. “The performance is at seven. Will you come?”

Hannibal has a far-fetched theory, an entertaining one if it holds true, but this outing will be entertaining regardless. Will doesn’t need to know everything. There is kindness in obfuscation.

“I didn’t bring any suits.”

“You could borrow one of mine.” His smile widens.

“No.”

Hannibal laughs, bright and mirthful. “Why not?”

“I have suits at home, and I don’t like your style.” Will stops, correcting himself. “To wear.”

And yet you are wearing my robe.

“But home is far, and the forecast predicts snow. Sharing suits will make our act believable. Indulge me, Will.”

Hannibal realises how close they are, bodies inclined across the table, their only barrier. Will meets his eyes, intense and frigid.

“And if the sizes don’t fit?”

“I’m sure something will. And if not, I have an extremely efficient tailor.”

“It’s unnecessary.”

Hannibal doesn’t falter.

Conflict is mapped out on Will’s brows, a constellation of doubt and consideration. When he relents it shows there first.

“Okay.” Will sighs. “I’ll *indulge you*. But I doubt I’ll find anything—your taste is ostentatious. Like a peacock.”

Hannibal glimmers. “I will choose to take that as a compliment. Come with me.”

Waning and inverting, time stutters as Will tries on suits behind closed doors. It's a peculiar sensation, waiting outside his own bedroom while Will rummages freely through his closet, his space, keenly analysing every detail like a hound chasing fresh blood.

Rich silk sleeves brushing past Will's skin, calloused fingers doing his buttons, knotting his ties. It is an enthralling picture; Will's imprint on his clothing. Dressed up in Hannibal's image like a doll.

This longing, it stinks like a morgue.

An age passes till Will opens the door, meeting his eyes. Direct. Assertive.

"I like this one."

He is dressed in a chequered navy blazer and matching pants, clothes Hannibal hasn't touched in years. Far too plain for his tastes, yet the colour compliments Will perfectly. The blazer is slightly oversized, and he wears a pale blue shirt with no tie, no waistcoat. It is buttoned low, a blend of design and Will's usual preference, but it highlights peeking collarbones; jaded, taunting things.

"I like it too." He inches closer till they are both visible in the mirror—Hannibal stood behind him, peering over.

Will remains silent, studying the fabric keenly. He will wear it, even if his dignity resists. Ego is soft and malleable in the hands of desire.

Hannibal is sundered by this desire.

With swift fingers he scrapes a hand over Will's chest, lightly skimming fabric. Will freezes but doesn't protest.

"Your buttons," Hannibal mutters, leaning in. Temptation. His mouth scrapes Will's ear. "You leave too many undone."

Eyes fixed on the mirror, he begins to do up the buttons, deliberately slow. Will avoids his gaze, hardly moving, scarcely breathing, but his manner is compliant, consenting. Wordlessly confessional.

This is the process of creation.

When his fingers crawl upwards, Will's pulse is a jackhammer tempo, thundering brilliantly beneath flesh. Hannibal rests there, on the delicate screaming of veins and arteries, his tell-tale heartbeat pounding away. Biology is the root of all betrayal.

Hannibal fixes Will's collar, stretching out the moment. Cold hands on hot skin. The scent of Will, of the world. Of unspoken lust, a sweet and heady thing, seeping silently from sweat glands; endocrinologic. Bodies are brutal in their honesty.

Hannibal digs nails into the tissue of his neck, only for a moment. Push and pull, in and out. In their memory, pale crescents bloom.

Then, he lets go, stands back, and straightens himself like nothing happened at all. For a fleeting moment, Will catches his gaze in the mirror.

“It suits you well,” Hannibal says objectively. It splinters with something unspoken.

Flushed red, Will takes a moment to gather himself, shadow swirling in his eyes. Longing and distrust, confusion and craving. A bruised and swollen storm.

“I have to go.” His tone is wary. “My lectures.”

For the second time today, Hannibal surrenders to impulse. “You should keep it on. By the time you finish work, it will be time for us to leave.”

Will tilts his head. He is bewildered, a little intrigued, but firstly paranoid, always paranoid. “No. I’ll change.”

A sting of rejection. Hannibal blinks it away.

The space between them feels murkier, foggy, but his curiosity feeds on the conflict. Now that Pandora’s box has opened, he must follow wherever it leads, because this hunger is apathetic to contingency and consequence. It does not care if he bleeds.

Today, even he does not care if he bleeds.

Ebb and flow, the lulling flux of Inner Harbour. The sky is bright and the world hiemal. Hannibal feels connected to Will here, in this foreign land of boats and birds and salty sea air.

Pencil in one hand, sketchbook in another. Will spills onto the page, skulking into faint landscape shadows, the lazy wisp of cirrus clouds. Artist and muse, his essence melted in the joints of Hannibal’s fingers, the flick of his wrist. Unavoidable, inevitable.

In the distance sounds the din of seafarers and passing merchants, laughing children and somber adults. All is well in the womb of apricity, beneath this wintry sun. All is well today and tonight, even if Will is feeling volatile. After the suit incident, how will he react? How will it shape his actions, his decisions throughout the day?

Hannibal imagines his mind spinning during work, words stuttering during lectures. Phantom nails on his neck, hot breath on skin. It’s a delightful thought—Will’s psyche bloated with Hannibal’s image, his influence. He wants it to stay like this forever. He wants to carve into Will and live in his flesh as a scar.

Ebb and flow, the ocean roils again. One day he will stitch himself into Will, weave tendons and nerves together in a miraculous skein, conjoined and everlasting. He will.

Under the hand of fate and heaven, there is no other option.

“There has been a change in my relationship with Will Graham.”

Bedelia tilts her head, all cold hauteur and icy intrigue, signalling Hannibal to continue. He can sense her fatigue towards Will, even if she is far too professional to voice it. It makes discussing him an even more amusing pursuit.

“For a case, Will and I have been asked to publicly pose as a couple. This includes him staying a week in my home.”

She almost raises her eyebrows. “How does that make you feel?”

“Conflicted,” Hannibal says, because it is true. “I’m struggling to decide the best approach. I fear this could be troublesome for Will.”

“And for you?”

“I’m impartial. This doesn’t affect me like it does Will—it fundamentally changes our doctor-patient relationship.”

“Your doctor-patient relationship has already changed. You care for him to an extent that borders on unethicality.”

“I care for him as a friend.”

A narrow, cutting pause.

“That’s unusual for you.” Bedelia sips her wine, slow and deliberate. “I always considered you an individualist. The social anti-social.”

Hannibal regards her curiously. “A polite way of saying sociopath?”

“I’m not sure how to categorize you in such terms. And I think you prefer it that way.”

She is right. He smiles, nothing to add.

“Why did you agree to this arrangement?”

He pauses, debating dishonesty. Settling on truth.

“I was curious.”

Bedelia knows the answer before she asks. “And has your curiosity been satiated?”

“No.”

They both understand this. His hunger is a bottomless thing.

“Through this, you will be sharing much more of yourself with Will Graham. He may spot loose threads in your suit. See gaps in your veil. How does that make you feel?”

Hannibal pauses.

How does that make him feel?

Will is worthy. He has no qualms about Will pulling at the seams and peering inside him; a discerning prospect, but a desired one. *Unlock me, and unlock yourself.* This longing for connection—it’s a cancerous thing. How do you navigate in a situation like this? How can Will?

“It makes me feel eager,” Hannibal decides. “I’m curious if he can do it.”

“Your curiosity is dangerous. Not only to you, but to Will Graham.” Her tone is darker, severe. “You are letting him stray too close.”

Perhaps. Too close and perfectly close; a fine line to tread.

“I have no intention of harming him. I only want the best for Will.”

Bedelia frowns. “The problem lies in you wanting things for him. Your objectivity is slipping, Hannibal. He clouds your judgement, and in turn, you blind his.”

“An eye for an eye.”

“No.” She lets that settle. “A tooth for an eye. A nail for an eye. It will never be balanced.”

He contemplates this.

While their relationship is built on a power imbalance, Hannibal views Will as his equal—or, rather a potential equal. The final testament to that will be if Will can climb his walls alive, unscathed. Eyes wide open.

It is remarkable to meet someone so unlike yourself, yet so identical at the core. Now that he has tasted it, he doesn’t want to let go. He needs the flavour like glue in his teeth.

Hannibal slides his eyes to the window. The morning sunlight has vanished, quickly replaced with dense, smouldering clouds. Again, he thinks of Will, Will, Will, the only man on his mind; this private humiliation. Hannibal has always been individualistic, and while he is and will always be self-preserving, his thoughts are stretching far and wide, tainted by a new stench. It is uncharacteristic. It is impossible.

Even so, Hannibal knows it is irreversibly, irrevocably real. This yearning—it writhes like a tumour.

It wants him to bleed.

Chapter End Notes

i just know s1 bedelia was SICK every time he brought up will... someone give her a break

changed my mind about the update schedule lol. going to be posting weekly on sundays so i have more time to edit everything :) thanks for reading!

thespis of icaria

Chapter Summary

date night!

When Will finally comes home, Hannibal is waiting in the living room with muted restlessness.

Winston by his side, his ears are pink and cheeks wind-chafed, glasses tucked in his pocket—he's feeling safe, then—not disturbed from earlier. A small but noteworthy success.

"Will. Welcome back."

He is still for a moment, before blinking quickly, grounding himself.

"Dr. Lecter."

The hesitation makes him wonder: when will they be on first-name basis? In this arrangement, surely he must use his forename at some point. Perhaps this is Will's way of establishing barriers, keeping a fabricated sense of distance between them. Or maybe he is afraid of unreciprocated closeness, the chance of rejection; abandonment. Perhaps both.

"The symphony starts in an hour." Hannibal studies Will, his jerky fingers and flitting eyes. "We should be leaving soon. Are you still—"

"Yes," Will cuts in, abrupt. Unprecedented. "I'm still coming. I'll change."

Incredible. Hannibal can sense his paranoia, bitter acidity lingering from this morning, yet for now Will is choking it down. An active suppression of instinct. Why?

As instructed, Winston doesn't follow Will upstairs. He is a pleasant dog; never barks and hardly makes a mess. Attentive and obedient. Hannibal calls him over, petting him while Will changes. Winston is fond of Hannibal, undoubtedly appreciating the new variety in his diet. Dogs are zealous for all kinds of meat.

When Will returns, clothes aren't the only new change. His hair is combed back, facial hair lightly trimmed, smothered in that distasteful aftershave. A sprinkle of petulant rebellion in the compliance, though it is still a sheepish entrance. His gaze is pinned to the floor.

Naturally, Hannibal can't help but comment.

"You look remarkable," he says. An honest review.

Will doesn't react. "It's your suit."

"I know. Shall we go?"

After a beat he nods, contemplation spinning into the draw of his brows, the turn of his lips. Hannibal thrills in puzzling Will, contrasting words with cadence, encoded double entendres. The permission to speak this way with him is his greatest privilege, an honour he cannot waste—for who else can tease and spar with Will without facing his wrath, his scorn?

No one, Hannibal thinks, as they walk through the foyer. No one.

Artificial light, clouds of perfume, the taste of humidity. Will grumbles displeasure under his breath.

The hall is swarming with people, identical suits buzzing around before the concert starts. His shoulders are tense as stone, with Hannibal carefree beside him.

"You didn't tell me there was a dress code," he hisses, head lowered. "Everyone is in black."

"There isn't. They have opted for conformity while we stand out. This is a good thing."

They paint a poignant picture: bitter navy versus bold vermillion. Will doesn't agree.

"And if I don't want to stand out?"

"A difficult task." Hannibal smiles. Before he can question the meaning of that, he slips his arm into Will's, delighting in the audible squirm that follows. "The symphony is starting. Shall we?"

For a moment he doesn't speak, and Hannibal wonders if forced proximity was too early a transgression. Will is repulsed by touch, flees from it like a burn, and Hannibal wants to probe this sensitivity as much as possible. Stretch the edges, count what he can take.

"What happened to maintaining boundaries?" Will's glasses smog with hot panic, but he doesn't move his arm. Blatant submission; trusting surrender. A pleasing result.

"Your wellbeing is my highest priority." It is a half-truth. "This stops when you choose."

"Okay, just… I don't know. Let's keep moving."

Victorious, Hannibal holds him tighter.

The hall is dim when they enter, concentrated light spilling onto the orchestra. Hannibal guides him to their seats—he chose the area, but Will insisted on paying for himself—

conscious of prying eyes burning into his back. He is likely feeling even more conscious, analysing everyone in view, inhaling their joys and neuroses. Empathy on overdrive.

Perhaps it should be. Hannibal has felt one pair of eyes watch particularly keenly since they entered.

There will be a deluge of questions after the concert, when everyone is thrumming with music and wine. Assessing the crowd, it was a perfect decision to come here—an endless assembly of gossips and busybodies who only see Hannibal here alone. After all, most know of his preference to delight in art individually. Now that he is attending with a companion?

The rumours will run riot. An unfortunate predicament for dear Will.

He breaks arms when they sit, and the sliced connection feels like a lost limb. Still, Will is significantly more relaxed within the mass, faceless and smothered.

“Are you comfortable?”

“As comfortable as I can be.” His features meld with the shadows. “You picked good seats.”

“The view is often as important as the performance. Personal comfort can unconsciously influence one's engagement and perception, leading to a skewed experience.”

“Sensory experience overriding art?”

Hannibal shakes his head, lips curving upwards. “Sensory experience amplifying art.”

“Amplifying your own perception of the art,” Will mutters.

“What is art if not a mirror to perception?”

They are near the middle, compromising a flawless view with Will’s comfort. There are no seats to his right, only Hannibal to his left, offering fewer people and an escape route if needed. However, the curious couple who always sit behind aren’t beneficial to Will like they are to Hannibal. Today, he is following a whim.

“I haven’t asked,” Will says. He is looser, but paranoia taints his breath. “What are they playing?”

“Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6, commonly named the Pathétique Symphony. It is an outstanding piece, the last premiered in his lifetime. I hope you will share my admiration for it.”

He nods, and the conversation ends there. The lights fade to spotlight the orchestra and collective chatter dims to a halt, significantly calming Will. Entering this place must be complete sensory assault for him. He may implode on the spot when speaking with the after crowd, but that’s a problem for the future.

For now, the symphony is about to commence. Hannibal breathes in thick, smoky air and closes his eyes.

Movement one: Adagio – Allegro non troppo. It starts somber, brooding, and Hannibal inhales melancholy and exhales introspection, letting his mind meander. Cruel winter mornings, the silent void of an empty office, an empty home. The bleak dawn of foreign schools and orphanages and places so unsightly, he wants to banish them from mind.

Then, the melody heightens, a thickening shift into all things intense and blinding, into fits of passion and lust. He recalls past lovers, past kills, endless flirtations with life and death, more flirtations yet to come. Florence. Will thrums beside him, a cacophony of pulsing blood and beating tissue, and Hannibal sinks into glory, into hope; the future.

Movement two: Allegro con grazia. The melody blends into a graceful, flowing fragility, and he thinks of elegance, the art of the universe and the horrors within. Serenity, tranquillity—they breathe through the movement, and an easing quietude settles under Hannibal's skin. The beauty of planning and perfection, artfully preparing a meal, conducting a melody.

He wonders if Will feels it too, this calmness like starlight in his veins, halcyon bones. For someone always guarded, constantly scanning for threats, it must be a painfully rare sensation for him. Will is a man at war with nature, his body and mind. One day, Hannibal will lead him to disburden.

Movement three: Allegro molto vivace. It is a bursting scherzo, pulsing vitality and life, the thrill of being the predator. Chasing the prey. He recalls dinner parties, music performances, poetry readings—and the delightful bloodshed that led him there.

How is Will interpreting this piece? Is his empathy melting into the music, picturing Tchaikovsky's devoted scribbling of compositions—or is he remembering personal anecdotes, entrenched experiences of his own? Once again, the common assumption would be both.

At last, movement four: Adagio lamentoso. Slow, mournful, the sorrow of breaking dusk. The orchestration is rich and deeply desolate, and Hannibal reflects on journeys—not of the symphony but in his life, this extraordinary existence. Suffering and grief, endless ennui, yet it has all built up to this moment, this apex of beauty and art. A foreign body and a foreign soul, the same heartbeat shared between them.

He opens his eyes, staring at Will, who is silent in immersion; true immersion. There is magnitude in this moment, something magnificent—sacred. A connection of beings, intertwined through art, through melody, through the blood-red ropes of destiny. Hot and cold. This wreath of fate. That noose, their noose. As the climax builds, Hannibal wants to sing, he wants to weep. He wants to pray, but to nothing Biblical.

It is with a heavy and quietening descent that the orchestra concludes, flattening into potent silence. He breathes in, then breathes out. Grounded in the body, firm in the mind.

God in his tears and in his teeth.

Hannibal rises to applaud.

Will stands beside him and there is something alien in his features, an indistinct web of emotion. He eyes Hannibal from the corner of his periphery and while he returns the gaze, its meaning remains indecipherable.

The audience follows their applause, and soon the stadium has erupted in ovation, a miraculous symphony of hands and hearts and love, always love.

Hannibal could bathe in this moment. He could die in it.

Together, they wait until the crowd files out of the auditorium before standing, arms linked like one being. One monster. Will shies away from the contact at first, but then relents.

“Did you enjoy?”

Will rolls the answer in his mouth, tongue pressed against his cheek. “I enjoyed.”

Authenticity cuts like a knife. Hannibal glimmers.

“I’m glad,” he says, sparkling with truth. “It was phenomenal. I could sit amongst these symphonies every day and always feel fulfilled.”

“I do see the appeal.” Will’s voice is small. Buried in thought—a demeanour that sharply changes when they approach the hall, noise heightening.

“It will be busy,” Hannibal warns. “We must fraternise. However, I will try and make it as bearable for you as I can. For now, wine?”

“Please,” Will exhales, a shaky thing. Hannibal leads him to the wine stand and pours them drinks. It is white, not his preference and a rather cheap brand for the event, but Will drinks gratefully.

Upon the small mass of people looking in their direction, Will freezes again, glasses on and aspirin downed. Entering the lion’s den, one part of him is giddy about Will’s discomfort, while another is flatly sympathetic.

“Be at ease, Will,” Hannibal murmurs. “I will do the talking.”

An older woman approaches, bringing a hoard with her. She is somewhat familiar, but the others especially so.

“Hannibal! How good to see you here again! You two, do you remember Hannibal?”

Ah—she is Martha, the English lady with osteoporosis and a preference for foie gras. An occasional attendant at dinner parties, but a full-time gossip. Perfect.

“Hello, Martha,” he nods, then shakes the hands of the two men—the earlier couple—feigning forgetfulness. “Is it…Stephen and Gene? It is a delight to see you all again. How is Peter doing?”

She pauses for a moment, eyes sliding between him and Will, their woven arms. Hannibal basks in Will's disgruntlement.

"Oh, you know how he is…always working, always the same. But more importantly, how are you?" She waves a hand, itching to ask questions. "And who is this lovely gentleman?"

His distress is a physical odour. Hannibal suspects even they can smell it.

"Will Graham," he says, stiffly shaking her hand. "Nice to meet you."

The group fix him with immediate stares, predatory. They can taste his otherness like something rancid, contagious. Will remains unaffected. He counters with intense scrutiny, empathy grinding and churning, logging habits, tics, approximate personalities and backgrounds. It is a remarkable gift to see his psyche in action.

"I have never seen Hannibal here with company before." Gene runs a hand through his hair, a greasy bottle blond. He smells of cigarettes and overpriced cologne.

"Nor have I. It's a pleasure." Martha smiles, but her eyes are scheming. She wants information, a juicy topic for Tuesday brunch. "Are you a friend?"

Hannibal is about to step in, before Will barks a harsh, grating laugh.

"Hannibal," he says with flat, wry mockery, "is my partner."

Hannibal.

"My!" Martha exclaims. Stephen, always sullen, raises his eyebrows. Gene flashes yellow teeth.

"Hannibal!" He pats his shoulder. Repulsive. "Well, I would have never guessed."

Hannibal, Hannibal, *Hannibal*, Will's voice looped in his mind. He used his forename. He said Hannibal. *Hannibal is my partner.*

Fever in his chest, felicity in his blood like an infection. Parasite consuming host.

"This is just astonishing." Martha turns to Will. "Hannibal has never brought a partner to the symphony before. You must be very special, I'd assume?"

She is speaking to him like a pet, and Hannibal almost twitches. Will drinks his wine and says nothing.

"You don't seem like his type." Stephen finally speaks.

He stills, but doesn't comment. Not yet.

"You're so…well. You know what I mean."

His marrow is turning cold. "Pardon?"

“Just a friendly observation,” Stephen says, smiling thinly.

The wine is now pungent on his tongue, air thick with static, and Hannibal’s perception has inverted. This man is prey. He is a pre-smoked Saturday evening side dish. He is the living corpse of a damned man.

Beside him, Will bristles. “Doesn’t seem that friendly to me.”

“I have to agree.”

Hannibal’s eyes crawl to Stephen’s jugular vein.

A brittle silence stretches, longer and longer until the group collectively shrink beneath their gazes. It is amusing, watching their confidence wither from nothing but silence and joint glares. Hannibal watches Will, who starts to suppress a smile.

“I didn’t mean to offend.” Stephen shrugs, shattering the atmosphere.

Hannibal imagines slicing into his neck, straight through thyroid cartilage and into his larynx. Merciless mutilation. He would never be able to speak again.

“That was rather rude of you, Stephen. We would appreciate an apology.”

After a tense beat, Will joins in. “Yes, we would.” His tone is lighter—mocking.

Will is enjoying this. His eyes twinkle in fluorescent light. The realisation floods Hannibal like sweet rain after drought—he is relishing in righteous torment.

“My apologies. I really didn’t mean to offend,” Stephen repeats, flushed heat spoiling his ears.

“Will?” He meets his eyes, singing humour only they share. “How do you feel about this?”

It is suddenly delightful to dance like this, back-and-forth synchronisation. Will eases into the rhythm, carries the cues. “I don’t know how I feel. It really *was* rude. We’re going to have to think about it.”

Hannibal almost beams.

“Well…” Martha is bashful, a hand in her hair. “Oh, my—well. We really should be off. It’s getting late.”

Another beat, then he smiles. “A terrible shame. Tonight was a lovely reunion, and I would love to have you all for dinner sometime.”

“You too.” Martha motions the men to follow her, blatant and hasty, while Hannibal appreciates his private joke. “Goodbye, Hannibal—and, um, Mr. Graham.”

They back away in tandem, and soon Will bursts into short, light laughter. Hannibal crinkles with mirth.

“A brilliant performance.”

“A moment of inspiration.” Will half-grins, watching them scuttle like spiders. “Cultivated by influence.”

“Whose influence—mine?”

“If the shoe fits.”

In the distance, more heads are turning towards them, pitiful attempts at secrecy.

“It seems we’ve attracted quite the crowd.”

“I don’t like it.” Will nurses his drink. “Can we go? Or do we need to do more *fraternising*?”

“We can go,” Hannibal says, but something is wrong. Those particular eyes from earlier are closer in proximity. There is a special admirer in their crowd. “Though, if it isn’t too forward of me, I’d like to stretch out tonight longer.”

Will raises his brows, silently permissive.

“There is a wine bar I think highly of nearby. Will you come with me?”

He half-laughs.

“What choice do I have?”

A flat joke, but he delivers it like a true belief. Something to note, perhaps.

“Very well. Follow me.”

Will is a calmer drunk.

Encephalitis is swift in lowering his inhibitions, so it is two drinks in when his pupils start to swim, words slurring softly together. They sit in an isolated corner of the bar, Hannibal attentive and upright, Will slumping.

“Something I don’t understand about you,” Will starts, “is why you left me an Italian book when I don’t know Italian. Why did you do that?”

Hannibal’s lips curve. “ *La Vita Nuova*?”

“Yes. You put it there, so I feel…compelled to read it. But I can’t because I don’t know Italian. Which you knew.”

“Beauty and art transgress the limits of language, but language is a barrier between man and literature. It demands effort and perseverance to appreciate.”

Will takes a slow moment to process this. “You want me to figure it out.” He frowns. “Dr. Lecter. You want me to learn Italian for you?”

Hannibal sparkles. “If that helps you understand.”

A laugh, full and ripe. “Understand? So now I have to learn Italian to understand you. You backed me into a corner.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

Someone shuffles behind Hannibal. He tenses but it is only the waiter, who soon walks away. Will's eyes follow him.

“But now I do want to. You made me curious, Dr. Lecter. That’s some backwards psychiatry. I mean, you even cooked me eggs.”

He blinks almost imperceptibly.

“The Eggs Hussarde,” Will supplies, eyelids drooping like the answer was obvious.

Warmth glitters in his chest, quiet and thrumming.

“How does that relate to our conversation?”

“It reminded me of my father,” Will says. “He used to make it for me in the summer. When he felt like it.”

This topic bleeds opportunity. A marvellously beneficial link from his dazed mind.

“Tell me about him.”

Will drinks again, tongue chasing dregs. “Tell you again? I already did…sessions ago.”

“Not in detail. You spoke of him, not about him.”

“Dr. Lecter, you're being...intrusive.” He props a cheek on his fist. “Prying.”

“I am your psychiatrist, Will,” he says, eyes glistening.

“Not officially.”

“Not officially.”

The silence is brittle and curious. Will sighs.

“Okay. He died a couple years back.”

Hannibal notes the immediate switch to death: a typical conversation killer. Drop the subject, evade the feeling: a pattern Will is accustomed to.

“How did that make you feel?”

A taut pause.

“Guilty. I hadn’t talked to him in years. He was all alone when he died… Happened in his sleep.”

Like this, Will is enchantingly vulnerable. Speaking without restraint and bite, stronger eye contact. Honest and loose. Gentle.

Lower forts.

“You feel responsible for his death?”

He shakes his head. “Not for his death. I feel responsible for his loneliness before death. I could never connect with him—not properly. It always felt like I was playing a… Um. A caricature. The caricature of a son.”

A morbid description.

“An ill-fitting suit, as you said previously.”

“Mm.” Will watches a point in the distance, words muddling. “He, uh… He did his best. It was hard on him, you know? Single dad, a drinker…slept with a gun near his bed. Reclusive but loud. Drunk all the fucking time, actually. But he was a good man. He loved me a lot.”

Hannibal doesn’t comment on the profanity, nor the bared fragility Will is offering. These are rare and tender chunks of himself. Vulnerability served on fine china. He catalogues the admissions to dissect later and stays tactfully quiet.

“Dr. Lecter.” Will looks up through dark lashes. “This is unfair. I’m doing all the talking. Tell me about your father.”

It is their typical quid pro pro because Will is hostile in the face of imbalanced power. His perception of their equality is paramount to their relationship, even if it is often skewed—or rather, obscured. Hannibal decides on honesty.

“I don’t remember him well. Pictures of my father are unclear, more dream-like than any memory.” Hannibal allows his mind to wander, only for a moment. “I was incredibly fond of him. I remember my feelings far stronger than his image.”

“You lost him young.”

“Yes.”

Will ponders this.

“Makes sense why you have your memory palace. You can preserve people in there… Keep the images intact.”

Hannibal freezes for a second. Punctured cartilage. “Yes.”

It is astonishing how sharp Will remains in disorientation. He doesn’t miss a thing.

Shifting the subject, he says, “Tell me about the funeral.”

“The funeral…” Will pauses, something bitter in his features. “It was small. His coffin was cheap. He died poor and lonely.”

Cross the lines, blur the boundaries. This is a weathered routine; as familiar as the back of his hand.

“Your killer. Does he fear loneliness?”

Will sits up, clumsy. “He does. He craves love… Intimate love, connection. He, uh… He wants to be in the arms of something greater than himself.”

“A father?”

“No. He isn’t doing this for family. He wants God’s love—unconditional. All-seeing. Something he’s never going to get.”

A fascinating observation. Hannibal follows the train of thought.

“Fatherhood and God are often depicted as one in the same. How do you understand the connection?”

“My father isn’t God.” Will sinks back into the chair. “But he feared God. So did I, when I was young. Not so much now.”

Hannibal watches intently, hunger writhing in his stomach. Hot, piercing like a lance.

“Nor should you.” A throb of heat. “And the loneliness?”

Will squints, burying his head into his hands. “Sometimes I fear it too.”

Tonight has been a miasma of victories.

Hannibal studies Will, skin damp and flushed, debilitated from wine and sickness. In this state, how much of tonight will he remember? So far he’s kept his clarity, his dry witticisms, speaking somewhat coherently through the decay, but long-term retention seems unlikely. He wonders if Will had time skips or hallucinations today at work but chose not to say. Surely they must be a regular occurrence by now. Perhaps he should ask Jack about it.

Hannibal is curious about Will like a child with a magnifying glass. Fond of the ant nest, but enchanted by its destruction. Satisfied when they wilt and sorrowful when they crumble. Push, pull. Stretch, snap. When will he bend? When will he shatter?

Regardless, if things stay at this pace Will may be seizing in his passenger seat, and that wouldn't be beneficial for anyone.

"You look unwell, Will," Hannibal observes.

A lazy pause passes before he registers the words.

"What?"

"You look unwell."

He sighs, faintly frustrated. "The waiter. Something is wrong with the waiter."

Hannibal sharpens.

"The waiter?" When Will doesn't reply, he presses further. "Will. What's wrong with the waiter?"

"He's been watching all night. Something is wrong with him. I see it."

So Hannibal was correct. "What do you see, Will?"

"I see it. I see him."

He lapses into silence, arms splaying over the table, face pressed against cool wood.

"Will," Hannibal whispers, placing a hand on his head—his scalp is boiling. "We must go. You are unwell."

Mumbling something intelligible, he glances up. Hannibal keeps a hand planted in his curls, apologetic. Forgiving. Devoted eyes burn into his back.

"Come." Hannibal helps Will up, who looks at him blearily.

"What are you doing?"

"I am taking you home."

They walk out together, arms interlaced like at the symphony, Will stumbling by his side. Approaching the car, it is clear that someone is following them, reeking with the sticky scent of hunger and premeditation.

With Will safe in the car, Hannibal turns around, meeting eyes with the waiter who is pretending to dispose of garbage.

It is an exhilarating thing, the satisfaction of correct intuition.

Laurent Bell, the young man with an academic fixation on Greek mythology, with a family archery store outside Baltimore. It was spelt out sweetly, softly, a sonnet for only Hannibal to decode. He suspected this from the first kill. The arrow impalement, dreary but abstract. Desperate. Angry at rejection, at the world.

It has been five years since Laurent walked into his office, scornful and bitter but curiously limp-armed. Searching for a psychological fix-it without any effort at all. Naturally, Hannibal encouraged latent darkness out of curiosity, less so when it didn't lead anywhere. All bark and no bite; violent fantasies only to ruminate, to ponder.

Not anymore, it seems. Perhaps this Laurent has something to prove.

"Hello there, Laurent," Hannibal greets cordially.

The night is cold. He doesn't reply.

"A remarkable coincidence, seeing you here after so many years. You've grown into a man."

He stills, dark hair and stocky frame illuminated by bleak luminosity, face obscured. Silence stretches on and on until finally, he speaks.

"Dr. Lecter." It is a soft, breathy thing.

Another killer. Another cultivation. This will be an outstanding joy for Will to piece together.

In the anonymity of night, Hannibal smiles up at inky, starless expanse and doesn't get in the car.

on an empty stomach

In the null hours of night, Hannibal wakes to the sound of violence.

Slamming and thrashing, vibrating through the walls—Hannibal stirs awake, staring at dark expanse. The noise is Will, and the subsequent flood of wan lamplight in the hall confirms this, seeping hazily around the door.

He pictures Will, alone and vulnerable, thrust awake in a bed not his own. Choking and trembling, gripping the sheets below only to feel fresher, foreign material, smelling laundry detergent and fabric softener. His sweat taints it. The world is black. His dogs are absent. He doesn't know where he is. Maybe Will thinks his dreams have swallowed him whole, purged him into a nightmare realm.

As the noise subsides, he imagines Will trying to soothe himself: curling up and squeezing skin, counting heartbeats on his knuckles. One, two, three, four, five. Alive, present and here. *It is 2:37 a.m. I am in Baltimore, Maryland. My name is Will Graham*. Yet, the images prevail—memories of rot and horror, the terrors in his heart. Those glistening fears and desires.

Eventually, Hannibal hears the lamp click and the light drains away, replaced by empty, stagnant silence. He sinks into it like water, a sunken cavern of abyss. Will has likely fallen asleep again. Either that, or he is lying in the dark like a statue, stiff from fear. Carved from marble.

As his wakefulness begins to lull, a creak rings out. Loud, protesting. Another creak, the tattling cry of floorboards. A soft click, and then the heavy groan of a manor door sounds, followed by an unsteady patter, bare feet on flat flooring.

Hannibal blinks, glancing at the door. No lamplight—is Will sleepwalking?

The padding continues down the hall, passing both bedrooms in an uneven shuffle, and the sound of unintelligible mumbling begins. He *is* sleepwalking.

With bared teeth, Hannibal slips from bed.

Hunched back, folded knees. One hand on the railing, sat on the staircase. Will is sliding down step by step—a heavy and arduous descent. Rich moonlight spills from upper windows, highlighting chipped nails, the pallor of his skin. This sparkling diadem of night. He doesn't stand once.

The world is thick with heat and fever and Hannibal studies him, chest coiling. Where is he trying to go? He can almost hear the blood roaring in his ears.

At last, Will reaches the bottom of the staircase and stands with shaky legs. He shuffles towards the living room, likely heading towards Winston. Hannibal keeps his distance. It would be a travesty to shatter the spell.

When he arrives, Winston climbs from his bed and circles Will frantically, ears up and tail down. The dog can smell his illness like putrefaction. When Will doesn't react, Hannibal takes the chance of slinking closer, standing opposite. Facing him with conviction.

He is pale and frigid and hollow in the moonlight.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal says, inhaling his sickness. Will is vacant and slack-jawed. A breathing carcass.

Softly, Hannibal presses a hand on Will's forehead. Boiling, skin slick and damp, a lazy throb at his temples. He smells of thick sudor and faint urine—a deeply unfortunate response to night terrors. In all states of consciousness, Will is victimised by his physiology.

Even so, Hannibal cradles his cheek, thumb brushing to lightly tug under his eye. No reaction. He is sightless, eyelids heavy and pupils swollen. Magnificently oblivious. He slips further, fingers grazing parched lips. Will's mouth hangs open, and he trails a delicate thumb along the bottom lip, feeling the jagged indents of torn, bitten tissue—a covert culmination of bad habits and nervous tics.

Hannibal's nail scrapes Will's teeth. A glimpse of hunger, fleeting and sharp, and he resists the desire to press further, palm the flesh of his parched tongue, fondle smooth gums. Reach deep into his throat, further and further till breathing becomes impossible, till he chokes and sputters and collapses, dead eyes and dead body, collapses into his grave.

No. He wouldn't humiliate Will with death so undignified.

Instead, Hannibal backs out, wet fingers skimming the white scar under his chin, crawling down, down, down to the dip of his neck, his pulse. It beats leisurely, a faint and fluttering thing. Unreactive to touch and influence, but singing sweetly in the belly of the beast—irrevocably alive, undeniably here.

Hannibal lusts.

There is something enchanting in this; exploring Will's flesh beneath a waning moon, touching him in yearning and blasphemy. A man who has spun himself into a silk of indecipherability, distilled into this walking cadaver, this marionette…

But Hannibal will decipher him. He will climb the forts, decode the labyrinth of Will's mind. He needs to, like he needs lungs to breathe.

"Will."

It is whispered into his ear like a promise.

Like a prayer.

Winston sits up and lays down, limp and restless. Agitated and unable to articulate why. He bends down, stroking his head with fondness, to comfort while Will cannot. Then, with a hand at the small of his back, Hannibal guides him to the staircase, curving around his waist as they ascend slowly, cautiously.

Will's shirt is soaked but Hannibal finds himself surprisingly apathetic, groping the body beneath. He is kindly shaped, firm muscle beneath ripe flesh. The urge to claw into meat, squeeze every curve, bone, organ—it is a visceral thing, an itching heat in his throat. It is startling to experience temptation so often. Potentially worrisome.

Hannibal leads Will through the dark, who stays silent spare for quiet groans, unintelligible. It is an eon till they reach the bed, and Will collapses immediately, folding himself into the sheets and settling into damp, fetid indents. He is curled up, knees tucked in. Quivering on his side like something infantile.

In the dense smog of darkness, his chest is a shallow, undulating thing, and Hannibal closes his eyes. This sweet, siren song of Will's mortality.

I hear your melody. I see your terror. This monster.

"Dr. Lecter, I need you down here now."

Jack's voice is tinny and grating on the phone, crackling with background noise.

"May I ask why?"

"It's Will. He had a… I don't even know what to call it. He contaminated a crime scene, ran out bloody, hyperventilating, like he didn't know where he was. Or who he was."

Pious priest Jack, worshipping his justice like religion, laying his sacrificial lamb on the altar. Bewildered when the lamb bleats. Hannibal is hasty in finding his coat.

"Where is he now?" he says, keys in hand.

"We've got him sitting outside. Katz is keeping an eye on him, but he's not saying much. You have the address?"

"I do. I'll be there shortly. Please keep watching Will."

He hangs up, uninterested in what else Jack has to say. As expected, a murder took place at the symphony concert shortly after they left—Stephen and Gene, publicly brutalised on the stage. A deserving finish for those two, though Hannibal would've preferred to slaughter them himself—the meat is only wasted by Laurent Bell.

What does he want to prove?

Will's reaction is unprecedented but understandable. How deep did the lines blur during his reconstruction? Had he recalled last night and believed he killed them in a fit of fury? To go as far as to contaminate the crime scene… It's a disconcerting decay in Will's psyche, and

Hannibal is both gleeful and disturbed, but anticipatory all the same. He can't wait to delve into it.

Will sits on a step outside, body tight and bent inwards. Beside him, Katz is talking but he remains unresponsive, rubbing his arms with jerky discomfort.

"Will." Hannibal approaches. "Ms. Katz."

"Hey, Dr. Lecter." She reeks of hesitance, of uncertainty. "Thanks for coming. Should I give you guys some alone time?"

"Please."

They exchange a nod, and Katz wanders back into the building, looking back only once. At least there is someone in the BAU who treats Will kindly—though Hannibal feels strangely conflicted about this. Another person offering Will comfort and support. Any source of stability that isn't him.

Even so, this can potentially work in his favour. Perhaps one day he will use her as leverage.

Dismissing the thought, Hannibal kneels in front of Will, forcing proximity and eye contact. Something rough and friable touches his knee.

"Will. Can you hear me?"

After a blink, he nods. Today the wind is tense and taunting, mussing his hair into knots.

"Talk to me, Will. Let me hear your voice."

"Dr. Lecter," he murmurs. Tone weak. A brittle, scathing smile. "Satisfied?"

He ignores the bite. Will is feeling defensive, like a wounded dog.

"Tell me what happened."

Wind rattles the air between them. With hesitation, he talks.

"I was… I don't remember going to the crime scene. I remember being at home. My home. I was gutting a fish. Gutted it too much, blood started pouring out everywhere, and then everything changed, and I was watching myself…killing them. Butchering them. Stephen and Gene, from last night."

His throat spasms. Close to retching.

“Um. I didn’t know where I was or how I got there, and I was running out with the arrow in my hand all bloody, and everyone was there staring. I couldn’t speak—I couldn’t do anything, and the blood was still on my hands.”

Will’s dissociation is rising to a new severity. From here, rapid deterioration is inevitable.

“I can still smell it in my fingernails.” He’s trembling. “Sick…and metallic. Like iron.”

Hannibal contemplates. Then he acts.

Gently, he holds Will’s hands and cradles tremoring fingers in his. Clammy and raw from scrubbing, blood is crusted deep in the nail bed, red-brown grit Will couldn’t reach. Hannibal reaches into his chest pocket, sliding out his scalpel—for sharpening his pencils if anyone asks—and glances up for permission, for consent. For trust. Will frowns but his hand falls pliant in Hannibal’s grasp.

Faithful.

With tender precision, he runs the scalpel beneath Will’s fingernails and scrapes out flakes of blood, wiping the scalpel on his handkerchief before moving to the next. Repetitive and rhythmic, soaking in the heady thrum of his deep palmar arch, the fragile web of arteries and veins woven beneath. Lacing through sinew, beating with thundering blood.

This parasite, this passion. His breath almost catches.

When both hands are clean, Hannibal doesn’t let go. He inhales beaten cartilage, bruised ligaments, the screaming pulse buried under. Will’s fingers are calloused from war. Touching him rivals sacrilege.

Hannibal’s hunger, it is spilling on the floor, his blood and bile and blessings. What does one do with an appetite like this? How does one conceal it, contain it, purge out the rot? He is a breathing laceration, a wailing wound. How can one ever bury a longing like this?

He is esurience; he is gluttony. He cannot banish this desire. It will gape and split and yawn. This is the Lord’s Supper. Bread and wine, flesh and blood, the sobbing pulse beneath fingertips. The filth in his soul and in his nailbed.

Will shudders, stirring Hannibal from thought. The present is waiting. He must speak, comment, permeate himself in Will’s reality. Permeate Will in his.

“These memories have slipped like sand between your fingers, yet you can feel their vacancy.”

Will swallows, meeting his eyes. Sickly, slightly red-rimmed. “They left a slick on the surface of my mind where they’re supposed to be.”

“Where you hope they’re supposed to be, but fear they never were.”

“The violence, it…” He takes a shaky breath. “It was too glorified. Too powerful. The killer wasn’t feeling that way, but I…contorted it.”

A ripple of heat in his stomach. Will is beginning to hyperventilate.

“You can’t let yourself be haunted by false memories of this murder.” Hannibal brushes his thumb against his. “You need to ground yourself in reality. In truth.”

“I didn’t kill them. That’s the truth—I couldn’t have. I’m clean.” His voice cracks. Hannibal places another hand over Will’s.

“These distortions are clouding your reality. It is essential that you overcome them.” He pauses, still curious, this old hat routine. Lead him astray once. “What grotesque distortions are clouding your killer’s reality?”

“Grotesque? This wasn’t grotesque.” Will stands to pace, restlessness winning. The separation of their hands feels significant, like a snapped chord, a severed string.

“This was meant to be art. The killer was trying to impress someone—or building up to something *while* impressing someone. Stephen, Gene—they’re stepping stones for the grand finale, his magnum opus. It will be something he wants this person to marvel at, simultaneously living through his fantasies, expressing his anger. He wants two birds with one stone.”

Lead him astray twice. “This person is the subject of his romantic eye?”

“No, no. But he will make it romantic *for* the person. Because he thinks it’s what they’d want.”

Perfect. Time to reward him with a hint, a clue. “This mystery person has a love life that appears to mirror the kills.”

Will stops, caught in thought.

“Yes. That’s it. This whole thing is Cupid creating art from his suffering, his personal… wounds. And he wants this person to acknowledge it, praise it, and then partake in the art—he’s the foundation. An old mentor, or teacher, or something. That’s it. That’s his goal here.”

“A remarkable inference,” Hannibal says. It truly is.

Will sits back down, hands shielding his face. “I don’t feel remarkable.”

“How do you feel?”

Another gust of wind, brutal and biting. Will shivers.

“Like… I’m in an ocean during a storm. I keep trying to rise to the surface, but every time I do, I’m washed away. I can’t tell the difference between the rain and the sea water.”

Hannibal wants to hold Will. He wants to hurt him. He wants to shatter Will into a million shards, only to piece him together again.

“I’m worried about you, Will.”

A dense pause hangs between them before Will speaks, staring at the sky.

“The clouds are dark.”

Hannibal studies him. “It might rain.”

“I hope it does.”

They share a silence like this, buried in individual thought. Hannibal ruminates.

These desires within him, they are cruel and contradicting. A battle of want. Will is making him question his nature, his truth—forced adaptation. Evolution. Blatant Darwinism.

His affection for Will grows by the day, and it is shocking. Disconcerting. It is strange and unnatural and faintly macabre. He doesn’t know what to make of it.

“Dr. Lecter, you’re here.” Heavy, hurried footsteps—Jack. Of course. “Will? You feeling okay?”

“As okay as I can be,” he says, desert-dry. “What do you want, Jack?”

Jack is suspicious. It shows in his knitted brows, tight shoulders, the stink tainting this fragile atmosphere.

“We need to talk. Both of you. Ready to come back in?”

“I’m not going back in there.” Will’s hands tremble. Hannibal resists the urge to reach out, to touch and hold.

“Okay. Let’s talk out here then.” Jack hesitates, glancing at Hannibal, then back at Will. “I’m concerned about this…arrangement. You two were here last night, correct?”

“Correct,” Hannibal answers.

“You were both here, and hours after you leave, there’s a murder.”

Will twitches. His breath is destabilizing.

“Jack. Would you mind discussing this another time?”

“No, no,” Will interrupts. “It’s fine. Say what you have to say, Jack.”

Cautiously, he nods. “Okay. I’m concerned about your safety. Both of you.” Jack doesn’t voice what else he’s concerned about, but the stench clings to his words. It is unfortunate for Will, always the target of suspicion.

“I must remind you, this was your idea,” Hannibal says, colder.

“It is, and I stand by it. All I’m saying is, if you—any of you feel unsafe, we can call this off.”

“Oh, so we couldn’t before?” Will laughs bitterly. “Thanks for the permission, Jack. I’ll keep it in mind when the next murder comes around.”

“Jack.” Hannibal switches to his forename, sharp. “I must insist on taking Will out of here. If he’s analysed the scene, there is no reason to keep him.”

Will says nothing. Jack hesitates.

“Alright. But he needs to be back in the lab when the evidence is processed. Is that okay, Will?”

He nods, a scarce thing.

“Alright.” Jack walks back with refreshing humility. One can’t win everything. Perhaps he should adjust to the feeling.

“Is your car here?” Hannibal helps Will up, grip steady and lingering.

“Jack drove me.”

“Another ride in mine, then.” A throb of impulse. “Are you free for the next few hours?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then, allow me to cook you lunch.”

Will stiffens. “Should we still be going places together? Together in a car, in public?”

“I don’t see the harm. After all, we currently reside in the same house. What happened last night may be coincidence.”

“But I don’t think it is.” Will frowns. “It’s connected. I just can’t piece together how. It’s all foggy. I feel…aqueous. Nothing is solid.”

Hannibal relents to emotion. He puts a hand on Will’s shoulder, weighing onto muscle and bone. Permeable and real, a tangible tether to the present.

“I’m solid, Will. You can hang onto me. I will hold you tightly.”

Rain breaks, the first drop falling on Will’s cheek. Firm and unwavering, he stares at Hannibal but doesn’t reply.

“What are we having today?”

“*Skerpikjøt* off the bone,” Hannibal announces. “Wind-dried, fermented mutton hailing from the Faroe Islands.”

“Sounds rare.”

“It is. It’s made by hanging raw meat in an outdoor shed called a *hjallur* and letting it rest in the salty air for five to nine months.”

Will watches him work, mutely intrigued. Following the intricacies of preparation. “What’s the occasion?”

“The fortune of our safety. The fact that we are here today, alive and unharmed, ready to devour a meal and not be devoured ourselves.” He slices the mutton onto Will’s plate, metal scraping meat.

Outside, dark rain thunders against the window. The world is blurry, smelling of ripe dew and damp earth.

“I feel devoured. And spat out.”

Hannibal shakes his head. “You must take agency over your turmoil. Be the ruler instead of the ruled.”

“The killer instead of the killed?”

He says nothing. The conversation wanes like an ebbing moon, laced with the gentle drizzle of rainfall.

“How is your head, Will?”

Will frowns, fleeting confusion. “My head?”

“Your mental space.” Hannibal sits, taking the first bite. Salty, decadent. Rough against his tongue. A scarcity cultivated to perfection. “Before today, you hadn’t mentioned losing time for quite a while.”

Will stills, considers lying then decides against it. His rigidity is an instant tell.

“I think,” he begins, “I am forgetting more hours of the day than I am remembering.”

Hannibal buries excitement under cool, clinical impassivity.

“With clarity, can you recall yesterday in its entirety?”

Will shrinks back, hotly suspicious. Encephalitis heightens paranoia. “Why are you asking?”

“I’d like to know how your psyche is coping with recent events. What it’s blocked out, what it hasn’t. Tell me everything that occurred yesterday in chronological order.”

He chews for a long, deliberate moment. “You cooked me breakfast. Eggs Hussarde. I taught my lectures. Walked Winston. Went to the symphony with you.” Will pauses. “We went somewhere after. Where did we go?”

“A local wine bar. Do you remember?”

“Vaguely. Bits and pieces. I don’t remember leaving.” He grips his fork, fingers digging painfully into ridges. “Was I drunk?”

“I wouldn’t say so,” Hannibal lies. “You were coherent. Lucid.”

“Huh. I don’t remember that. But I remember the feeling of…eyes. Eyes on my back, on the nape of my neck. It’s scattered in my memories. I’ve been feeling eyes everywhere.”

“Your paranoia is manifesting as presence hallucinations. Like danger is always in the room, lurking in every corner.”

Will doesn’t comment, frowning into his wine. It is draining rather quickly.

“Do you date, Dr. Lecter?”

He blinks, cutlery cold in his hands. “Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity. We’re pretending to date, but we’ve never discussed the matter. Not properly.”

How forward. Hannibal’s lips curve into a smile.

“I used to date. Nowadays, I prefer the solitude of my own company.” He inhales the wine before drinking; dark and sweet. “And yours, of course.”

Will mulls this over, lips pressing and pursing. “What changed?”

“I hadn’t felt genuine connection with my previous partners and found failure in the pursuit. However, if someone happened to spark that connection, perhaps I would reconsider.” He swallows the meat, thoughtful. “And you? Do you date?”

“Oh, yeah. All the time.” Will laughs, breathy and light. “No. I don’t date.”

“Why not?”

A blank stare. “You’ve seen me try. Look what happened with Alana.”

Hannibal regards him with cold curiosity. “What did happen with her?”

“I’m too unstable for her.” Will shrugs. “For love in general.”

“Was it love you felt with Alana Bloom?”

A snap of thunder. Winston whines under the table and Will reaches down to comfort him, clicking his tongue, fingers tousling fur. He’s laid there for the entire meal, watching them

both in a silent plea for scraps. Will has been feeding him at random intervals, shamelessly unsubtle, hopelessly endearing.

“Love? I don’t think so,” Will says once Winston is settled. “I was just…grasping for something, and she was there, and she acted towards me in a way that *could* be considered love, but isn’t really. So I was grasping when I kissed her, even though I knew it’d end badly. I did it anyway.”

“You acted on impulse, wrongly perceiving her kindness as romance, your crutch for stability.”

“Sort of. Ever since I started working for Jack, there’s been something between us—I know that’s real, because she admitted it. But it was always just that: lingering. Hazy. Everything has been hazy recently. I wanted to clear the air.”

“Clarity,” Hannibal muses. “You wanted things to be certain. Final.”

“Yes. Can’t hold onto something you can’t touch. I was just grasping. Maybe I still am.” Will looks up through dark lashes. “I think I still am.”

The confession stirs warm, passive pleasure in his gut. Hannibal lets it settle, recalling another detail Will mentioned.

“Do you view yourself as unstable?”

“Don't you?” Will half-smiles, and cloudy light glints against his teeth. “It’s bad. Every person I’m with, they look at me like I’m a blink away from a nervous breakdown, and I keep absorbing that, their pity and wariness and concern, and it makes me feel like I actually am what they think I am.”

He takes a breath, hand finding Winston. “I can’t talk about having a bad night’s sleep, or a headache, or anything minor without the whole room glaring at me like I’m about to implode in front of them. Like I’m one aspirin away from overdosing on field or…drugging someone.”

Will drinks in the perception of others like a sponge. In his working environment, absorption and replication is inevitable.

“You constantly reflect the people around you—it is a hindrance of your empathy. It causes you to mirror their expectations, how they expect you to behave.”

“Exactly.” He pauses, weighing his words. “I don’t feel like that with you. You aren’t reflective, or transparent. You’re opaque. Everyone else is water, sometimes a thin sheet, but you are cold and white ice. Impenetrable. It’s unusual, Doctor, and it makes me wonder about you. But it’s calming too. Before you, I hadn’t felt that with anyone.”

A skein of warmth twists in his chest, raw affection. Privilege. The rarity of a gift.

“I could say something similar about you,” Hannibal confesses. “The world I see is full of transparency, while you are the sole reflective ice. Beautifully reflective. You are the only

person in the world who can assume my worldview, see the universe from my eyes."

Will stares at him. His eyes are searching.

"But I can do that with everyone."

"It's not special with everyone. It's special with me. To me." His heart is heavy. Throbbing. "You are special to me, Will."

The words linger, pulsing thickly through the air between them, dancing through slim atriums and narrow, but his response is chasmal. Will's pupils are dark and thin, bouncing leg visible in the patio door reflection, but he doesn't react. Doesn't respond.

Hannibal smiles. Let him brood, let him ponder. Let him struggle against the tide of fate, with the answer sitting directly opposite him.

Let him search and search and search.

crossing the rubicon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"As usual, he coated the lead arrowheads in botulinum toxin, hit them both Cupid-style, then used a knife for the rest," Zeller explains, glancing briefly at Hannibal.

It is his first day in the morgue and they're still adjusting to his presence. It was only logical Jack would ask him to watch over Will—it'd be nonsensical to send him in the field without counsel after yesterday, even if Hannibal knows it's too soon for fieldwork regardless. Last night, Will screamed in his sleep. To steal the metaphor, this is two birds with one stone: peek behind FBI curtains while supporting Will in duress—heighten his codependency.

This is a dreary place, stinking of decomposing bodies and rot. The team pay it no mind, but Hannibal wonders how Will copes with the stench, inhaling death and decay daily. After he leaves, the scent surely lingers. Olfactory hallucinations are damning things.

"We traced the arrows to an archery store right outside Baltimore." Price lifts the evidence bag. "All of them are from the same place and bought at different intervals—the decomposition is different. Like, a couple years different. Our guy spaced it out."

"He uses them often," Jack states.

"Not necessarily." Will is in the corner, pressed up against steel walls. Feverish, jerky, and physically distanced from the team. "He's a collector. Someone with a background in classics or mythology. A student or a teacher. Not in archery because he's not shooting them—he can't shoot. For some reason, he's physically incapable. He's only impaling."

"Then why's he using poison?"

"He's embarrassed about it. Wants to give the appearance of Cupid-shot arrows, if Cupid *is* who he wants to replicate. He cares more about how others see the crime than how it really is."

Hannibal absorbs this with quiet intrigue. Will is staring, staring, staring at the bodies—Stephen in particular. He doesn't look up once.

"You think he might be replicating something else?" Jack probes.

"Could be." Will knocks back three aspirin, ignoring the consequent stares. "He kills with pride. He probably prefers to be seen as Eros, not Cupid. Similar concept, it's Greek and Roman mythology, but they're typically presented different in art. Statues."

Warm intrigue flickers in Hannibal's chest. He decides to support the claim.

"In most depictions, Cupid is often portrayed as a child, while Eros is depicted as a man."

“It might not even be Eros.” Will rubs a hand over his face. “He shoots people to make them fall in love, but these couples are already in love. No use in that.”

Hannibal struggles to dim his glee. “Have you considered Anteros?”

Will brightens. Realisation striking. “Yes. That’s who I was thinking of. Anteros punishes those who spite love, who reject it. This killer—he is *intimate* with spite and rejection in love. This is his anger and his injury.”

“Wow.” Katz raises an eyebrow. “You guys are really clued up on Greek mythology, huh?”

“Our killer has an ego problem.” Jack cuts in. “I’m still calling him Cupid. Tell me about the bodies.”

“These ones were messier than the previous kills.” She points to Gene. “With Gene Tanner, the arrow only scraped his left atrium. Our Cupid missed his shot—well, not a shot. Impalement. And not Cupid, either.”

“They were different. Something about them threw him off.”

The room stales, like it does every time Will speaks.

“It was hasty,” Zeller adds after a beat.

“Rushed.”

“Too excited,” Will says to the bodies. “Couldn’t help it. You were special. Had to rip you up quickly.”

A strange thing to say.

The atmosphere stiffens, heads turning to Will in tandem. He shudders, shaking the thoughts away. Clearing his head.

“I need the address of the archery store,” Jack says. “Will, Dr. Lecter. Let’s head over now and see if the owner has anything we can use.”

He doesn’t react.

“Will?”

The silence stretches on and on. Before intervention is necessary, Will jolts back into himself.

“What?”

“The archery store.” Jack frowns, terse and wary. “Are you coming?”

“Um. Okay. I’m coming.”

Disoriented. Gaze cloudy. Sweat clinging to his collar, his tousled curls.

Hannibal nods. “Then so will I.”

Will is feeling ill far earlier than usual—today will end very badly for him. There is no doubt about it.

The thought brands Hannibal with scalding pleasure.

The archery store is small and cramped, permeated in the thick stench of age, of iron. Michaud Bell, a short and stocky man, is eyeing them all behind the counter. Hannibal’s blood simmers. This will be immensely interesting.

“I mean, I don’t know. I get all sorts of customers,” he says, shoulders squared. Palms flat on his desk.

Jack regards him with cool impassivity. “Nobody suspicious?"

“How the hell am I supposed to know? People come in, they buy their equipment, then they leave.”

“Do you keep track of your buyers?” Will adjusts his glasses.

“I keep records. Doubt you’ll find much, but if you *must* look, I’ll get them out.”

Jack nods. “We would appreciate that, Mr. Bell.”

They wait in silence as he finds the records, tense and palpable. Will wanders, seeing nothing but scanning everything, finger sliding along a dust-coated windowsill. He lifts his finger, stares at the imprint left behind. Hannibal stays a steady foot behind him.

“Quickly, if you will.” Michaud dumps the records on his desk. “I could have customers in here whenever. What will they think, seeing the damn FBI in my store?”

An unlikely possibility—he is clinging to a failing business. A worthy pursuit for the sake of passion, but a questionable excuse to the law.

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem, Mr. Bell,” Jack says, trying to appease while Will grabs the records and returns to the window. Watching the narrow, empty line drawn from the dust.

In a way, this is reminiscent of their first case together, sifting through files for Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Potent nostalgia—witnessing Will’s mind dance and spin for the very first time. Not a pleasant memory for Will perhaps, but Hannibal enjoys the recollection.

Flipping through pages, he pauses. Hannibal studies him.

“What do you see?”

“Nothing. There aren’t any buyer patterns. Except…” Will frowns, flicking through again. “There are accounts of stock being bought but no money coming in.”

A draft blows in, the wrath of winter.

“Shoplifters.” Michaud waves a hand. “It happens, you know? Especially around these parts.”

Highly doubtful.

“No. It’s too consistent.” Will shakes his head. “Are you giving away free arrows, Mr. Bell?”

A crack of tension. Michaud leans across the counter, pens and paper and cups spilling backwards.

“To who? You think I’d give my arrows away for free?”

Will downs more aspirin. He is swaying on his feet.

“Sir,” Jack steps closer. “We aren’t suspecting you of anything. We just need to know where these arrows are going.”

Another snap, splitting through the air.

“Not suspecting, like hell. You think I’m the one killing those men? The queer ones on TV? I don’t have a problem with queers. My son is a queer. How dare you come in my store and—"

Will stills.

“Your son. Is he into archery? Arrows, particularly?”

“Of course he is.” Michaud’s fingers curl around a pen. “He takes after me. How dare you—coming in here guns blazing, insulting my name, my business, now my family… You know what? I want you all out."

Instantly, Will understands.

“What is your son doing with the arrows? He doesn’t take bows. He can’t shoot. What’s he taking them for?”

“My son isn’t taking anything—get the hell out my store! Talking nonsense, trying to spit dirt on my name. No warrant? Out!”

Michaud stands, and Jack recognises the need to retreat.

“Will.”

No response. He is immobile, glazed eyes and shaky limbs.

“Will?” Jack repeats, then glares at Hannibal to do something; anything. Make his favourite toy work again. “Let’s go, Will.”

“Why are you still standing there?” Michaud ambles towards him, fists coiled.

Danger.

“Will.” Hannibal places a hand on Will’s shoulder, firm. Grounding. “Return to the present.”

No reply. Fluttering eyelids, a twitching finger—it is an absence seizure. He is having an absence seizure as they speak. Hannibal bites back a smile.

“No, that’s it—” Michaud rushes forward, arm swinging back, and Hannibal jumps in front. Instinct over rationale, blocking the fist with his forearm.

Will stumbles back. Michaud twists, snatching Hannibal’s collar and lunging again, nails scraping his cheek. Disgusting.

Rough breath, a hiss of focus. Behind him, Will scrambles to consciousness, running and running to slam into Michaud. A sickening crunch. The flash of colour, of light, of bodies crashing to the floor. Hannibal’s knee screams.

His stomach churns.

Michaud punches Will and he punches back, grappling for agency. Brutal, instinctive. Hannibal lurches to hold him down—Will punches again, and Michaud’s head smashes against the counter. Skull cracking. Wood splintering. Hannibal smells copper.

Magnificent.

Pressure slams into Hannibal’s carotid, the blade of an elbow. Hannibal stumbles, instinct looping an arm around Michaud’s neck and yanking—time slow, desire thick—offering him up raw. A gift. Will follows the opening and lunges, head pounding into Michaud’s.

A thundering snap. A screech, mangled and sharp. Limbs tangling.

One final, savage punch from Will then Jack is wrestling them both apart, Miranda warning ringing out, handcuffs snapping. Michaud is still, splayed on wooden flooring. Motionless but breathing.

Hannibal is dizzy with adrenalin, with bloodlust, with glory. Thunder, thunder, thunder, rattling in his heart. Will shakes beside him, slumped beneath the desk. Breath unsteady. Nearing hyperventilation.

“Will.”

He looks up at Hannibal. His pupils are blown, his mouth ajar. Gore streaks his fists and forehead. Red blooms on his collar.

“Will,” he repeats, the word roaring in his ears. He lifts his jaw, smearing slick carmine on his cheek.

“Hannibal.” Will reaches for him, fingers probing the slice at his cheekbone, trying to wipe the blood away—or spread it further. His forename. *Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal*.

In the aftermath of passion, Hannibal replays the fight in his mind. Will sinking into violence, delivering it with instinct. Working together to trap Michaud, disable him, flay his skin for beating. Will’s blind brutality heightening further and further until Jack intervened.

Hand-to-hand conflict hasn’t felt that thrilling in decades. Will revitalised everything. He brought lightning and thunder crashing down like God’s hand. His eyes when Hannibal trapped Michaud in the perfect angle for violence—even Will knows this hunger.

Hannibal wants it to go further. He wants this feeling again, but further. Higher stakes. Greater beauty.

He wants Will to kill with him.

They stay like this beneath the counter until Jack stands up, done calling the ERTs.

“What…” He catches his breath, leaning against the desk. Staring down at them, limp like ragdolls beneath. “What the hell was that?”

“Will may have a concussion,” Hannibal says simply.

His stare withers, pointing at Michaud. Disgruntled hysteria. “And him?”

Dead, hopefully.

Slightly unsteady, Hannibal stands. “I’ll check.”

At his absence, Will makes a soft and hazy sound. A doggish whimper.

“He’s fine,” Hannibal examines Michaud with deadpan professionalism. The world is still spinning. “Concussed. No serious injuries—he should wake up before the ERTs arrive.”

“You said I was concussed.” Will rubs his eyes, picking up his fallen glasses.

“You are. Please sit down.”

“We need to investigate…the son. He’s doing something. Could be our guy.”

Hannibal glitters with young joy, potent delight.

“Okay.” Jack is still leaning, massaging his head. “We deal with that later. But both of you—what the hell happened here?”

“Self-defence,” Hannibal says, feigning confusion. Will doesn’t answer.

“Didn’t look that way to me.” Jack’s eyes flit between them. “Not after the first punch.”

Hannibal almost groans. “Jack. May I speak with you in private?”

Currently, he needs to calm Jack while also sowing seeds of doubt about Will. A delicate path to tread.

Jack follows him outside without protest, glancing warily at Will. He is back on the floor, dazed and smiling at the ceiling. Almost narcotic. Falling into mild delirium, perhaps. A minor seizure followed by physical conflict and a concussion—all within a minute—is unkind on the brain.

“Dr. Lecter.” His tone demands an explanation. A chance to speak his piece.

The air is crisper than before, fresh snow salting from clouds above. They stand on the sidewalk, pavement tilted and cracked, dead trees swaying in winter wind.

“Jack,” Hannibal starts. “It pains me to say this, but Will is unwell. You shouldn’t have brought him here—not after yesterday. You know I advised against this.”

He crosses his arms. “What do you mean he’s unwell?”

“Will isn’t to blame for this violence, but it confused him. That state of confusion caused the escalation.”

Jack mulls this over, brushing glitter from his coat.

“What are you telling me?” he asks, deliberately neutral. “That he’s too unstable to be here? That he’s going to keep getting…confused?”

Hannibal frowns. “I’m telling you to be careful with him. From the moment you first walked into his classroom, you have been placing him in potentially destructive environments. Each time you do this, he edges closer to destruction.”

“He’s saving lives.”

“And today, he almost took one.” Hannibal sharpens his tone. “What Will has is an excess of mirror neurons. He absorbs everything he’s exposed to, and then he reflects. Have you noticed during intense conversations, he adopts your cadence of speech?”

By his expression, Jack has. “I thought it was a gimmick to get the back-and-forth going.”

“It’s involuntary. He couldn’t stop himself if he tried. It’s simply how his mind works—this routine of absorption and reflection. Naturally, if you continue to force him into violent spaces, he will start reflecting violence.”

Jack contemplates this. His second broken pony.

“Will has always got through it,” he says, mostly to himself. Feet shifting. “He always comes back to being Will.”

“Not always. So far.” Hannibal regards him with calm disdain, letting the claim settle between biting wind. “We should go back inside.”

When the paramedics arrive, Hannibal insists on treating Will's wounds for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, because he will, without arrogance, do a better job than them. Secondly, because he doesn't want anyone else touching Will, cleaning his cuts. That is only for Hannibal to do; Will is his charge. Thirdly, they may notice Will's feverish disorientation and suspect something else is occurring.

Jack can only watch on until the snow ceases and the crowd migrates outside, leaving them in the store. Isolated, alone.

Away from prying eyes.

Will sits on the raised counter seat while Hannibal stands, treating his injuries. They are the same height like this, staring directly into each other's eyes—a task concussed Will finds more manageable.

"You're bleeding too." Will takes gauze from the med kit, dabbing the mess from Hannibal's cheek. A mindless action, but it sparkles with intimacy. His blood shines like ichor under Will's nursing.

"I'm not concussed." Hannibal cleans the laceration on his forehead. An epidermis scrape—it won't scar. "And I'm bleeding far less than you."

Will says nothing, but Hannibal rejects the quietude. He is feeling rather talkative.

"I must thank you for today, Will. You defended me. Remarkably."

"Shouldn't have done it. Not really." Will averts his gaze. "But you're welcome."

A chance, a leap.

"Tell me. How did hurting Michaud Bell make you feel?"

Will's eyes dart around the room. His turmoil is audible, a thundering battle.

"Just," he says at last.

Hannibal inches closer. Hisses into his wound. "Because he deserved it?"

"Yes." Will's voice trembles. He shakes his head like he can't believe the answer. "I wanted to go further."

A flicker of heat. Leaning in, lips brushing the laceration. A faint taste of flesh. "Impulse conquered you. You wanted to kill him."

Will doesn't move.

In the corner of this tight, dim store, there is nobody to see them, nobody to watch. It is unlike Hannibal to be reckless. Impulse has conquered two today.

Only God can witness this spectacle.

“May I?” Hannibal asks, and Will nods. Mutely acquiescent. Permissive.

Snaking a hand into sodden curls, Hannibal presses his lips against the wound, brutal and tender. The first kiss. Will doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe, heartbeat screaming beneath sundered skin. This contagious disease of desire.

Then Hannibal relents to passion—sliding his tongue deep into the slit; thick, cloying, sucking lightly to loosen the clots. There is the faintest tug of resistance, then ripe, hot rivulets stream into his mouth.

Will gasps. Hannibal savours.

Hands clench his sleeve; Will is attempting to ground himself, contain his noise. Unsafe for the fabric. Gently, Hannibal presses his free palm to Will’s mouth instead, baring the ulnar border like an offering. A sacrifice. Pliable to his wishes, Will accepts the flesh.

“To bite,” Hannibal murmurs, inhaling damp tissue and soft meat. “Don’t shout.”

Wet warmth on his hand, teeth passively puncturing skin. When Hannibal returns to tongue the lesion, Will bites down a whimper and his hand shrieks, the electrifying split of skin and bone. Brutality, a sharp and crimson kiss. Now they are both in agony, and they are both in heaven.

There is religion in suffering.

Push and pull. Kiss, inhale. Hiss, exhale. Devour.

Hannibal bites into yielding flesh and Will screams, muffled and low, teeth crunching into tissue. Lustful eyes, half-lidded. Debilitated with pleasure.

Will may remember this, and he may not. He wants him to remember. Hannibal will carve memory into delirium.

He tastes salty, slick with sweet gore and sour sweat, unbelievably soft on his tongue. Will is pulpy meat and carnality, and Hannibal permits himself to be ravenous, to consume. To pierce the laceration into stretching and splitting and gaping. Saliva in the wound. Hunger in his heart. Teeth marks on his soul.

In due time, Hannibal is satiated.

Inhaling the scent of Will’s sickness, his sacrilege, he presses a kiss on Will’s forehead—the fissure infinitely widened. Dragging his lips across skin, he lowers to kiss his chin, his left cheekbone then his right—crossing him with devotion, a blood-stained crucifix. His Eucharist.

“Thank you, Will,” he whispers, stepping back. Saying grace.

Will is coated in fluid, carmine wetness caught in his lashes. Wordlessly, Hannibal cleans the area like before, reluctantly wiping away the cross. Then he secures the injury with a gauze pad, bright and sterile, and after cleaning his own face it seems nothing has happened at all.

Hannibal studies his hand, the angry indents marking the skin. Crescent moons, red glimmering beneath. Will has marked him: an eye for an eye. A tooth for an eye. He bandages the wound.

“Shall we?” Hannibal points to the door with complete composure. Nothing has happened. Nothing has changed.

Will stumbles beside him, not saying a word. Perhaps having no words to say.

When they exit the paramedics have cleared away and Jack is finalising police statements. Michaud, fully treated and conscious, scowls in the back of a police car.

“Jack,” Hannibal calls, a hand near Will’s back. “I’m taking Will home.”

Multiple heads turn. Jack is weathered as always, but the policemen are young and new to the field—bursting with self-importance.

“Sir,” one says, “we need a statement from you both before you leave.”

Absolutely not.

“My apologies, but I can’t do that. My patient is sick, and he must go home.”

Jack tilts his head. “Your house?”

“Of course.” Hannibal smiles, mildly blithe. “Where else?”

Will sways beside him, ragged. Like a puppet. Before anyone can comment, he is climbing into Hannibal’s car, head propped against the window—firmly placing pressure on the injury.

“Goodbye, Jack,” Hannibal says, then joins him. In the car, the cloying scent of iron lingers.

Will dozes fitfully in the passenger seat, still slumped against the window. The snow has thickened in the past half-hour, and with every thump of the windshield wipers, he stirs.

He wakes when the weather begins to lighten, voice raspy and low. “Dr. Lecter.”

“Will.” Hannibal watches from his periphery. “Welcome back.”

“I didn’t leave.”

Snow drifts against the windshield, a whimsical ballet of winter. Will rubs his eyes, slowly sitting up.

“You have been distant all day. In a way, you did.”

“You…” He touches his head, probing the gauze. “What did you do?”

Hannibal focuses on the road. “I treated your injury.”

Will lowers the window, breathing in cruel, cold air. Grounding himself. One, inhale. Hold. Two, exhale.

“I don’t know what to think.”

He remembers the experience. It crawls in his cadence, hot like fever. Hannibal suppresses glee.

“How do you feel about the events of today?”

A small scoff, nothing but breath. “There were a few events today, Dr. Lecter. What specifically?”

“You tell me.”

Will considers this, conflict deepening his frown.

“I miss my dogs,” he says, voice small. “I miss them. I can’t stay at your house. I need to get back.”

So that is his approach.

“If that’s what you’d prefer.” He stares straight ahead, keeping his tone balanced; impartial. “When will you leave?”

Will hesitates. “I’ll leave tonight. Sorry. I’m feeling… After today, I…”

The world smells acrid. Hannibal forces neutrality.

“Will. Your distress is understandable. These past few days have been upsetting for you. There is no need for apologies.”

He accepts Will’s discomfort, and he will respect it because he respects Will, and because it will not last. Laurent Bell will be found innocent by the FBI, so Jack will want to continue luring the killer, and Will will feel obligated to continue. Comfort will settle between them once more because Hannibal is his stability, Hannibal is his paddle.

Will can push, but he will be pulled back by fate, by God’s hand. This sickness is preordained, stinking like cruor in the sun.

It is inevitable.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was sossooo much fun to write..... thank u for reading :)

ship of theseus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They are still packing when he receives the call.

Only with extreme reluctance was Hannibal permitted to help—behind the obstinance, Will's mind has lapsed. Folding and refolding clothes, reaching for objects that aren't there. Looping actions, repeating words. Dementia is creeping in and it is incredibly fortunate timing.

Hannibal doesn't comment, regarding him with cool inquisitiveness. Feverish skin, glazed eyes. Damp bubbles tainting gauze. Unsteady feet, swallowed aspirin. Blinking in and spacing out.

Perhaps his actions today were rash—Will is deteriorating faster than anticipated. It is steep, startling, and slightly disturbing, but he will find a way to make this work. Hannibal is nothing if not opportunistic.

He knows who is calling. It isn't a conversation Will should currently hear, but he answers regardless.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Lecter." Jack sounds deflated, like a popped balloon. "Good evening. Is Will with you? I couldn't get through to him."

"He is in my house."

Will slumps on the bed with hands wrung together, elbows on his knees. Attention foggily piqued.

"Great. Think you could put him on?"

Hannibal almost sighs into the phone. "My apologies, but I'm hesitant, Jack. What do you wish to say to him?"

Will stares. Jack almost sighs back.

"Alright. Well, pass this onto him, if you will. We found the son, had a good look around his place—found nothing but the arrows. A collection of them. Michaud Bell was protecting his son because he thought sharing his arrows was illegal. Nothing incriminating in the house at all. They're clean."

Hannibal hums. Laurent did well in clearing out.

"You believe they are innocent?"

“I believe the father is. He’s paranoid, probably thinks *something* is up but doesn’t know what. He’s not involved, but I don’t know about the son. He fits Will’s profile to the letter.”

Naturally. Will doesn’t miss a thing. “You suspect him.”

“I do. Which is why—and I hate to ask this—but I need you and Will to resume…” He coughs. “Luring. We need to bring this guy back out into the wild. See exactly who he’s targeting, clear the air, catch him in the act. I have a place in particular, actually.”

A predictable yet intriguing outcome.

“After today, I’m sure you are aware of my immense reluctance,” Hannibal says lightly. Will stares harder.

“I know, Dr. Lecter, but we need him. We need you both. It won’t be long—only one more time doing *this*, and if any danger starts we shut this thing down straight away. Only one.”

He pauses, only for the tension. “I suppose I can speak to him, but I highly doubt he’ll be receptive. What is the place?”

Will puts out a hand, gesturing for the phone. Hannibal politely ignores him.

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter. I do appreciate it. I’m thinking the Baltimore Center Stage. Familiar?”

“Of course.”

“Great. Tomorrow evening they’re playing Romeo and Julian. Hear that? Julian! I think our guy will be all over it. The FBI will pay for your tickets, and they’ll be scouting the area. Do you think you could get him on board with this?”

He turns to Will, whose hand is still out. Fingers spread, palm bared. A plea.

“I can ask, but I can’t make any guarantees. It is always his choice, Jack.”

There is sudden pressure at his ear, wriggling and obtrusive, and the phone slips from his grasp. It is almost a snatch. Hannibal studies Will, feigning disapproval, but there it is, like moonlight strafed between clouds. That glimmering, petulant streak sparkling through the mist.

“Jack.” His voice is coarse and low. “I’m here. What do you want?”

As Jack explains, his grip on the phone tightens. His silence is prolonged, yawning into a thin, taut eternity.

“Okay.”

Then he hangs up with a short and sudden snap. Hannibal smiles.

“Romeo and Julian,” Will says, handing back the phone. “That’s funny. Are we going?”

“Would you like to?”

“No.” He faces the duffel bag, loose and uncoordinated. “Not like I have a choice.”

“You often express the sentiment that you lack agency in your decisions.” Hannibal has mulled this thought over since the wine bar.

Will rubs his eyes. “Innocents could die. Have to do what I can.”

“You’re an innocent.”

He doesn’t reply, but his brows knit together tight.

“I feel sick,” he says eventually. Throat hoarse. Tone weak. “Really sick. Do I seem sick to you?”

“You look flushed. It may be from stress.”

“No. Maybe.” Will sags onto the bed. Hands shield his face, massage his temples. He is pasty and wax-like under lamplight. “I don’t know. I have to pack.”

“We are packing now. I’m helping you pack.”

“Yeah,” he mumbles. “I know.”

His short-term memory is slipping. It must be difficult to string together thoughts in his state —hold on to his previous detachment, the car ride disdain.

Hannibal continues to pack for Will, a thought striking him. With Will muted and malleable like this, perhaps the time for testing this is right. Perhaps he will be receptive.

Although, it will be better if he isn’t. In this state, he is particularly unpredictable and that brings a separate, stronger thrill.

“Will,” he starts. “Would you like to keep the suit you borrowed?”

A slow, heavy blink.

“What?”

“The suit you borrowed,” Hannibal repeats. “I’d like you to keep it.”

“The suit from the symphony?”

“Yes.”

Will’s features harden. “No. It’s yours.”

“I have no use for it. I haven’t worn it in years.” He tilts his head, lips curving. “It would be my gift.”

Gloriously, the atmosphere shifts. Encephalitis makes Will volatile.

“Your gift? What—you think I want your donation now, Doctor? After today? Trying to win me over?”

The intensity is fascinating, sparked like struck tinder. Even so, Hannibal switches tactics. “No. I only wanted to show you kindness.”

“That isn’t kindness,” Will spits, standing up. Shakily. “It’s charity.”

Tension crackles, a grotesque and giddy thing. Their first argument, perhaps. A domestic scuffle.

“You don’t need charity.” Hannibal points out because it is true. Will owns acres of land and seven dogs; despite his humble lifestyle, he is financially comfortable. This reaction is likely rooted in a poorer childhood: echoes of his father, inherited protest. An instinctual rejection of help—anything to preserve dignity. Protect the ego.

“You are treating me like I do,” he counters. Fists clenched, teeth gritted. His last ounce of energy.

“That wasn’t my intention, Will. I sincerely apologise. I overstepped my bounds.”

The air rattles with static. Provocation. Hannibal wants to push further.

Will inhales and exhales, rubbing his temples, clawing his scalp. Hannibal can almost hear pounding in his head. His stuttering circulatory system, its roaring din.

Soon, he speaks. “It’s fine—I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to snap.”

Hannibal considers this carefully, emotion swirling in his chest. Light and flickering, something fecal reeking beneath.

“Thank you for apologising.”

Will nods, settling on the bed. “Do you want me to take the suit?”

“Only if you want to.”

“Okay.” Will presses his eyes, deep into the sockets. Too exhausted to argue. Too exhausted to care. A slightly underwhelming conclusion. “It’s so bright in here. And hot.”

“Would you like me to dim the lights?”

Hannibal can smell his brain, damp and festering. Melting to liquid, boiling to steam. He wonders how clear the events of today are. How much the sickness has seized.

“No. Yes.” He stops, speech slurring. “I don’t know. Something is wrong with me. I’m sick. Maybe I have an infection.”

Certainly not. “I cleaned your wounds. You don’t have an infection.”

“You’re my psychiatrist.” He splays on the bed, raw and open. “I’m not supposed to be in your house. Sleeping in your guest room. I’m sick.”

The words sound cold and wet. They taste of bitter odium.

“I haven’t made you sick.” Hannibal stares, unblinking. “I care for you, Will.”

Will sinks into the mattress, a dozy thing. “Well. You can do both. I think you like doing both. Making me sick and making me better. That’s bad practice, Dr. Lecter.”

His voice is flat and brittle but lacking disdain. A weight drops in Hannibal’s stomach, heavy like an entombed stone, but the heat of Will’s accuracy softens the blow.

Once again, his mind is at a crossroads. His ambitions are at war.

“You sound confused, Will,” Hannibal says instead; a fair observation.

Will sits up, but his body works against him. Futile physiology, blood and body and bone. The sole determinant of will, of want. Of honest and unbridled desire.

“You’re my only friend, Doctor.” A strained, breathy pause. “Do you like that? Being my only friend?”

Of course. He should be the only one.

Hannibal doesn’t reply.

Lazily, Will smiles. He’s drifting, barely there. “Maybe I made you sick too. Bitten by the same bug.”

Something flips in his stomach.

Hot and cold and parasitic. Innards coiling. Hazy malaise. Hannibal monitors the sensation with diagnostic detachment, a clinical curiosity. The curdling clench of his guts. Skin tight, muscles stiff. Pulsing aorta.

Bitten by the same bug.

His thoughts are interrupted by retching and the sharp stink of bile. Acidic, permeating—Hannibal spins around, catching Will and grabbing a wastebasket before vomit sprays onto the carpet. His sickness spills all over, dribbling down his chin and shirt and bed covers. Like a slit vein, life pouring from the fissure. Unrelenting. Episodic.

It takes a lifetime till Will stops, Hannibal coaxing his back and holding back his curls, far too short for the necessity.

“God,” he spits into the basket. Voice rough, breath sour. Hannibal rubs in circles and waits for the moment to pass.

Eventually, it does. Time is patient in turmoil.

“Think that’s it,” Will coughs. He is clearer, eyes rimmed red from reactive tears. “Sorry. This is… I’ll clean this up. I’m sorry.”

Wordlessly, Hannibal retrieves a tissue box and grabs several, softly wiping Will’s mouth, the filth dripping down his neck. This intimacy, the permission of this intimacy—it feels like quiet forgiveness.

But he knows it isn’t.

Studying the dirt and grime, Hannibal pauses. Swelling, surging—a wave of disgust rolls over him. Will is fetid and fractured and feeble. There is nothing remarkable in this. His madness is overflowing. His illness spills on the floor. He has done nothing to fight, to retaliate. To see.

Shards and fragments, this broken, fractured man. Easy to harm and easy to kill.

The moment passes. Hot hatred sizzles into passive neutrality, familiar affection bubbling beneath. Endearment returning in a soft and gentle breeze. Still, he stores the memory with significance. Something to remember.

It is astonishing how differently he treats Will. With anyone else, he would be constantly repulsed. The ardour is back, alive and sweet and breathing, and Hannibal bathes in the monstrosity even if his ardour is never a kind thing.

When Will’s face is clean, Hannibal breaks physical contact with slow reluctance. His sliced cheek throbs and his hand aches only slightly—ripe bruises blooming under gauze. The living proof of Will’s passion, his cacoethes. A morgue of memory. It is unlikely, but he hopes the punctures scar.

“I’ll bring water,” he says, unintentional warmth bleeding through, “and new bedding.”

Will nods. They both ignore the number of sheets tainted during his stay. Changing them is an almost daily affair, but Hannibal knows better than to mention it, ruin this rare spell of peace. Of submission.

“Thank you.” It is a quiet, murmured thing. Hannibal isn’t sure what specifically he’s being thanked for.

Prioritising water first, he heads downstairs and—he stops.

There is an unexpected guest in his kitchen.

“Dr. Lecter,” the boy breathes, and Hannibal could implode with the effort it takes to be amiable.

“Laurent Bell.”

Laurent sits at the end of the dining table, lips pursed with awful smugness—like it was intellect that brought him here and not Hannibal leaving the French doors slightly ajar, suspecting a visit.

Walking closer, he slips a discreet knife under his sleeve. “You didn’t say you were visiting. I would’ve prepared a meal.”

“Sorry, Dr. Lecter.” He waves a hand, elbows on the table. Sardonic. “I was in a rush. Couldn’t quite send a telegram.”

“So you chose to break into my home.”

Laurent raises his brows. “I wanted to have a conversation. An actual conversation—not whatever the hell that was at the wine bar.”

Hannibal sits at the opposite end of the table. The air smells of cooked meat and cleaning products. “What do you mean?”

“You knew they would come for me. Come for my dad.” He pauses, arms spreading wider. “You knew when we spoke at the wine bar, and you did nothing.”

Arrogant. Hannibal’s finger spasms, veiled in a steeple. “I warned you.”

“Not about my dad.” His cadence is flat, lacking inflection. “You knew they’d come for me next, and you did nothing. Why?”

The sky is dark and muddy outside, a bleak evening expanse. Its shadows slide over Laurent like serpents, a schism of form and matter.

“Why would I?” Hannibal tilts his head, blade icy on his skin. “I am not obliged to you, Laurent. I praised your work and warned you of the future. What else were you looking for?”

“I want you to work with me.”

Hannibal lets his distaste filter through.

“You once said I should cultivate the seeds of my passion till they reach fruition. I remember it clearly, because I thought the metaphor was stupid. Cliché. But they’ve reached fruition now, Doctor. And I want you to be my final piece.”

“Of course you do,” Hannibal says, vaguely intrigued. “I’m your influence, your inspiration. Tell me, who would I be paired with?”

Laurent raises his head, hair falling into his eyes. “That man you’re always with, of course. I was watching even before he moved in. Will Graham, is it? Your partner?”

A pause. Weighing his words.

“Will Graham is not my partner.”

“No? You went through a lot of effort to make it look that way. Before it was only a suspicion, but when you attended the symphony… What is he, then?”

It seems Laurent hasn’t yet shed his penchant for nasty gossip and base intrusion.

“My relationship with Will Graham is of no concern to you, Laurent, because I respectfully decline the offer.”

His face shifts with the shadows. “You decline? I break into your house and you decline?”

Obviously. “Yes.”

Laurent collects himself for a moment. His eyes are swirling, obscured.

“You know, you were a really bad therapist.” He fixes on nothing in particular. “I came to you wanting to stop these thoughts, these behaviors. And what do you do? You encouraged them. You wanted me to kill, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t think you would.”

“You never did have faith in me. You thought I wouldn’t change.”

Hannibal ponders this. “I have always believed every person is capable of change if they are willing to put in effort.”

A beat passes, thin and cutting.

“I changed. I proved you wrong, Doctor. They’ve got the FBI on me, so I must be good at this thing. And I enjoy it, really. But I’m not fulfilled.”

“You wish to seek fulfilment by killing me?”

In the dark, Laurent sparkles with honesty. “Yes.”

A rather juvenile hope, but he lets the authenticity linger.

“Tell me, Laurent. How would it differ to your previous kills?”

“I’d shoot you for real,” he whispers. “I’d seriously do it. I’d string you up in the Baltimore Basilica with the arrow in your heart, reaching out to Will Graham. He’d be posed the same, suspended in the air. Like the Creation of Adam.”

“An ambitious vision.” Hannibal appreciates the creativity. “Why kill in the basilica? I was under the impression you only chose places of performance.”

“All places of worship are performative. The highest form of performance, I’d say.”

“The farce of faith, of endless devotion.” He considers this. “How is your arm these days?”

Unconsciously, Laurent stiffens. “Still doesn’t work. He killed the nerves, remember? It’s useless. But I’ll shoot you anyway—I’ll make it work. Maybe I should stab Will Graham in the arm too. All the way down, give us matching scars.”

“Because he is a closer reflection of you than me?”

“Yes. You’re closer to Camille. In both appearance and personality.”

Hannibal could scowl.

“I disagree with both statements. Will Graham is nothing like you, and I am nothing like Camille. Obsession blinds you, Laurent. Your arrogance is your keeper.”

“Arrogance?” He laughs, loud and brittle. Hopefully, Will is too unwell to hear. “You are far more arrogant than me, Dr. Lecter. My mind was shattered by your ego. You made me damage people.”

Not entirely.

“That was solely you, Laurent. You’re still searching for a martyr to project your actions onto. Camille refused to be that person and you blamed him for it. Now that Camille is gone, you blame me.”

Silence hangs between them, thick and crackling. The joys of psychiatry.

“I’m going to kill you, Dr. Lecter,” Laurent says, completely neutral. Perhaps parroting Hannibal’s indifference. “You will be the fifth pair. I’m going to make you into a painting.”

“Why the fifth?”

"Aristotle said the universe is made up of five elements: water, earth, air, fire, and ether. You will be ether, Dr. Lecter.”

A mildly interesting prospect. “The substance believed to fill the universe past the terrestrial sphere. The essence the Greek gods breathed and lived in.”

“Exactly.” Laurent relaxes a fraction. “Personified by Aether, its primordial god. The myth says his mist filled the space between the dome of sky and earth-bound air.”

Hannibal smiles, vaguely proud. “You always did have astute interpretations of Greek mythology. On the subject, I have to ask. With these kills, is it Eros or Anteros you’re replicating?”

Laurent laughs, softer than before. “Anteros, of course. I know what they call me—the Cupid killer. It’s stupid. I’m not making anyone fall in love. They’re already in love. If they’re going to be inaccurate, they could at least call me Eros.”

He perceives Will and Hannibal to be in love. A matter to dissect later.

“Anteros, the god of requited love.”

He nods. “The avenger of the unrequited.”

Peevishly artistic—Hannibal can simultaneously criticise and respect it. He cannot wait till Will interprets the next kill.

“These kills are your wound. The injury of unreturned love. Your anger towards the concept of romance itself.”

Uncomfortable, the shadows twist. “We aren’t in therapy, Doctor. I’m telling you how I will kill you. You can't keep...doing that.”

“I can’t wait for you to try, Laurent,” Hannibal answers with honesty. Potent anticipation.

“On Sunday, it’ll be your turn.”

A skip in the pattern. “Then who will you kill tomorrow?”

“You’ll see. I think you know already. You know, I’m a thoughtful person, so I’ll make it dramatic for you. I know you like that. But for now, I’ll be taking my leave.”

“A shame. I was mostly enjoying our conversation.” It is the truth, but he must emphasise the ‘mostly’.

“So was I, but the topic has run dry. Thank you for your time, Dr. Lecter.” He stands up, stiff and awkward in the loose suit. “I suppose I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“Goodbye, Laurent. I’ll be waiting.”

Hannibal waits until he leaves, stiff limbs slinking into black expanse. When he is certain Laurent is gone, he slides the knife from his sleeve, briefly rinsing it before returning it to the stand. Filling a glass with water, there is lots to contemplate.

Undoubtedly, Laurent needs to die. He is becoming more intrusive, less restrained. It is evident even in his temperament, that false, self-satisfied nonchalance, not to mention the kills themselves. As for the method…

Will. He could be the one to slaughter Laurent. He should be.

With enough subtle persuasion, Hannibal could accomplish this. It would have to be while Will is lucid and present—he needs to kill as himself, not in the fog of delirium. That is an important detail, so his fever would have to be formally treated in a medical setting, but only until Sunday. Temporary coherence before the doctors recognise the severity of his condition.

Hannibal cannot treat Will with his own supplies—he would grow suspicious upon clarity, so Will must be hospitalised, compelled to leave once Laurent comes knocking. Checking himself out for whatever reason Hannibal provides.

It could work. If he calculates Will's behaviour correctly—a near-impossible task—and perfects the timing, it could. Will, emerging from incongruity, would be with a killer whom he *wants* to murder, albeit for the fabricated sake of 'justice'. His suppressed delight in wickedness.

This could be perfect. He would need to enter Laurent's lair first, ruin himself to incentivise Will and justify the kill to law enforcement, but that is a fair price. Anything for the gift of cultivation.

It could be the final step forward from Garett Jacob Hobbs. The night Will submits to his instincts, accepts how beautiful it is to kill. He needs to understand, to feel. To consume and be consumed.

Still, Hannibal's patience is waning. How long can he maintain this farce, concealing himself from Will? It is growing tedious. The timing is all wrong. When will he connect the dots behind the Chesapeake Ripper, the recent string of kills? Hannibal holds trust, he holds faith, but waiting is tortuous. If Will doesn't figure it out soon there will be no choice but to frame him, for then he will understand. Then he will see.

One part of Hannibal hopes it comes to that. The novelty of Will imprisoned, brimming with violent hate and churning bloodlust, isolated by everyone except him. Another part resists, preferring Will to find out sooner, the bursting unpredictability of that possibility. Like a silent, ticking time bomb.

Fate will decide their destiny. Hannibal can only bide his time, follow his passions as they bloom.

With Laurent, Will may finally understand himself. He needs to be liberated from his inhibitions, shattered and rebuilt because repair requires transformation. Kintsugi—a fractured teacup reconstructed with gold. The flawless is less beautiful than the broken.

Soon, his eyes will open. Soon, he will see.

When Hannibal returns to the guest room, Will is attempting to clean the sheets with tissues, scrubbing mindlessly on hands and knees. Feverishly.

"Will." He bends down, offering the glass. "Drink."

Will mumbles gratitude, accepting the glass but his eyes are absent. Vomit-stained collar. Sour pungency, butyric acid. This glaring loss of lucidity.

"Your shirt is dirty," Hannibal states. "You need to change."

A slow, heavy grimace. "Yeah."

Solving the previous issue, Will cannot return home in this condition. Hannibal didn't anticipate his sickness but he fully intends to take advantage of it.

Hannibal kneels, closer to Will but still above him, still looking down. He snakes off his shirt, pleased when Will permits it. His body is supple and pulpy, a raised scar protruding from his shoulder. The colour has faded into skin, but the shape has not. Fleeting, the impulse to touch, to scrape, but no—he has done enough touching today.

Not now and not like this. Only when he is whole.

Cross-legged, Will leans against the bed, gaze sliding as Hannibal douses a cloth with water and soap. It is a miserable alternative to a shower, but he doubts Will can coherently wash himself like this, and he would never be forgiven for stripping him in the shower. For now, this will suffice.

He scrubs tenderly, grazing over his heart, his ribcage. Will is soft and pliable in his hands, eyes brightening and dimming, floating in and out. Skin on skin, heat on heat. Rivalling his earlier contempt, a sudden fervency rises.

Like this, Hannibal feels he could melt into Will. Stitch their souls together, reach further and further to find himself on the other side. Intertwined quintessence.

There is a name for this feeling, but it is fragile and friable. He is afraid to speak it. If he does, the word might crumble in his mouth.

When he is clean and dry, Hannibal unpacks a shirt and pulls it over him. Will is glassy, eyelids drooping, lashes fanned out. He could use scopolamine to blur his memories, but no —even in fragments, Hannibal wants him to remember this evening. The affection, the humiliation. This complete collapse of command and control.

Hannibal wants him to remember, so he will. So he must.

Chapter End Notes

hahaha romeo and julian

swan song prelude

Hannibal wakes to the sound of mumbling.

It is a brilliant morning, heatless light slanting in through the curtains. Neck throbbing, sore joints. Bruised scapular. The harsh clash of body and oak.

Clarity dawns in a blink and Hannibal finds Will splayed in the guest bed before him, bathed in a dusky rime of gold. Tepid washcloth, gleaming skin. Fluttering lashes. Curled up into something small and hard and guarded, but slowly unfurling.

For a while, he refrains from disturbing the peace. This low city melody, humming neighbours and rumbling vehicles. The sweet song of morning birds, of dawn breaking into novelty. Will's jaw is slack. His hands are open, stirring quietly. It feels cruel to shatter the moment.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal says eventually, sleep thick in his voice. His joints groan. This is a terribly inconvenient position to sleep in.

Will blinks, eyelids heavy and drooping, then squints up at him. In empty sunlight, he is bleary and doelike and brightens with recognition. Then he flinches.

Sharp, violent—it seizes his limbs in a singular tremble. He shoots backwards, panting but soundless, mouth hung ajar. Hannibal watches in deliberate silence as Will crashes into the headboard and freezes—knuckles white and sweat pearly. Slamming into the present.

"Dr. Lecter."

Elongated vowels, rounded intonation; the name holds splashes of his true accent, a euphonious drawl of bayous and boatyards. Will rejects the vulnerability of blood and kin. He has buried his upbringing in youth. It is a blessing that sleep and panic have loosened his tongue.

"Sorry," Will mutters, gaze pinned to the floor. Relaxing only slightly. "You, uh. Surprised me."

Hannibal absorbs the jerky fidgeting, his hunched form. "Nonsense. I'm the one who ought to apologise. I startled you."

"No, it…" Will shakes his head, sitting up. "I'm not used to… Um. Why are you here?"

"Last night you were unwell. I stayed here to ensure your safety."

"Oh." He swallows, throat clenching around the stone of speech. "Oh, God. I… Sorry."

Memories dance in his eyes, reflected like grainy strips of film. Mortification is a sweet and heady scent. Dark chocolate and bright wine, ripe oxyhaemoglobin.

“No need for apologies, Will,” Hannibal says. “You are hardly to blame. Stress has compromised your immune system.”

The sun is rising, honey clotting into pale light. Will shields his face in his hands. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“Then say nothing. We can change the subject. How are you feeling?”

His hand shifts, snaking to the scar beneath his sleeve. Instinctive, self-soothing. The other hand rubs his opposite arm.

“I feel clearer. Somewhat.“ In the glimmer of an empty glass, his mouth twists. “Like my brain has been rinsed with cold water. But suds of soap are stuck in the crevices.”

The improvement will last several hours at most. Last night, he spent additional efforts to reduce Will's fever, only enough for what he needs today—a sliver of clarity. It is nothing against the rend of encephalitis. Momentary coherence was the intention, and it will be the result.

“Is soap preferable to fever?” Hannibal muses, inching closer to the bed. Will stiffens.

“Soap is clean. It isn’t turbid.”

He stares between drawn blinds, then stands to open them. Like the sunlight, his legs are bare and bright and bristling.

“Clean, but never clear,” Hannibal counters. “Have you been feeling turbid?”

“Everything has been feeling turbid.” Will returns to the bed, back turned. Rigid apprehension. “Everyone.”

“Have I?”

A soft laugh, then Will faces him. His mouth opens and closes but no words emerge.

“You must tell me when you drift, Will.” Hannibal leans forward. This time, there is no resistance. “When reality becomes a hazy, distant solitude. You must let me know.”

“My sine qua non*,* ” he mutters, sarcastic and scathing but hardly unkind. The Latin rolls smoothly on his tongue.

“Indeed.”

Will is exposed and raw but increasingly coherent. The return of his senses is a staggering, albeit temporary relief. The kiss of spring after a brutal blizzard.

“I was supposed to go home yesterday,” Will hums. On the surface, his voice is lightly questioning. “But I’m still here.”

“I couldn’t send you home in good conscience. You were incredibly unwell—feverish. It would’ve been dangerous.”

“And now?”

“You can leave,” Hannibal says. “Would you like to?”

Will is slow to answer. Hannibal needs to know the extent of his apprehension, its precise root and cause. He needs to measure the trust between them as something objective. Something tangible.

“Got to think that one through,” Will admits. Hesitant, not adamant.

“I’ve grown accustomed to your presence in my home.”

“You’d miss me.” A sly rephrase.

“Yes.” Hannibal tilts his head. “I would miss you greatly. I would feel your absence in the walls.”

Will thumbs his gauze pad, purposefully unreadable. Testing a hypothesis. “Are we going to the theatre today?”

“We were. Are you feeling well for it?”

“I suppose.” He pauses, eyes averting. “Are you—aren’t we going to talk about it?”

“I’m afraid you’ll need to specify.”

This time, Will doesn’t break the eye contact. His gaze stings like a needle. Crime scene stare, cold and piercing. Scanning for evidence, for confirmation.

“Playing coy, Doctor?” Another sly rephrase. Hannibal doesn’t react.

“Not at all. We can discuss anything or nothing—the decision is entirely yours.”

“I’d rather discuss nothing,” he says suddenly. Firmly. “I need to think. Gather all my thoughts in one place.”

“Tell me. What is the nature of these thoughts?”

“Loud. Crowded—like a nest of bees. I need to redirect them.”

Hannibal narrows his eyes, mildly taunting. “Searching for a specific subject change?”

“I’m starting to believe in fatalism.” Will lowers his gaze. It is evasion, direct surrender—dropping the topic to see where Hannibal will carry it. Perhaps a test. Possibly denial.

“You are losing faith in free will.”

“Someone out there has faith in free will. It’s the *validity* of that belief that I’m questioning.”

“The Cupid killer?”

“The Cupid killer.” In strafing light, Will darkens. “Something about him has been eating at me. I can think about it more clearly now.”

A fascinating switch. “Tell me more.”

“He’s killing of his own free will, I know that. But every kill I’ve seen seems…charged by something different. Someone different. This person that the killer admirers—they are *driving* him to do this, whether he realises it or not. They’re a killer, and they want to create other killers in their image.”

Imperceptibly, Hannibal smiles. “Have you dealt with this killer before?”

Will stands to pace, a calculated show of vulnerability. This is an extremely curious situation. It seems his trust in Hannibal remains strong, but his subconscious is unsettled. Deep down, silenced and suppressed, Will holds suspicion.

“It’s hard to tell, because he’s not the one doing it. He’s just…orchestrating it. He’s a composer, and the Cupid killer is another face in the symphony.”

“An astute observation.”

“When he kills again, I’ll have to see if there is any influence lingering. How much of it belongs to him.”

Hannibal smothers his felicity. “I’m certain you will.”

It is the truth. His faith in Will is liturgical.

“Shall we go downstairs? I’d say it’s time for breakfast.”

Will stops, limbs untensing. Softer around the edges. “What are we having?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Today can be a day of change, of abnormality. It has already started this way—why not continue the sentiment?”

“Go with the flow.”

“I always do. It is incredibly healthy to follow our impulses.”

Will raises his brows. “Is it?”

“You must stay in tune with your urges, Will. It promotes mental balance. There is no flaw in indulgence.”

“Rather hedonistic.”

Hannibal gleams. “Aristippus of Cyrene argued that the goal of a good life should be the sentient pleasure of the moment. He was the founder of hedonism as a philosophy.”

“Not a bad outlook, when you put it like that.”

“Not a bad outlook at all,” Hannibal agrees. “Shall we?”

After breakfast, Jack rings the doorbell bearing gifts.

“Good morning, Dr. Lecter,” he greets, hat in hand. “May I come in?”

Inviting himself so early without a phone call is absolute discourtesy, but it would be a greater discourtesy to deny him. Regardless, Hannibal is eager for Will’s reaction. His discomfort is always a pity and a pleasure.

“Of course.” He holds open the door. “It is unfortunate timing—you just missed breakfast.”

“Unlucky day for me. I’m starving. Where’s Will?”

Hannibal shows him to the living room, where Will sits with wide shoulders and open knees, a cogent stance of defence. Winston rests at his feet, stiff like a bodyguard.

“Good morning, Will.” Jack’s tone is gentler than usual. “How are you feeling?”

Will shrugs, bottom lip stuck out. Vaguely mocking. “Been better.”

“Well. Haven’t we all?” The delivery falls flat. “I’m here for these. You’ll both have to wear them at the theatre.” He opens the bag, revealing bulky Kevlar vests—always hideous beneath suits. “Just in case anything goes wrong.”

“Something will go wrong.” Will rises to pace. ”This killer likes us—Hannibal and I. For some reason, we *mean* something to him. If it isn’t us he tries to kill, it’ll be someone else in the theatre only because we’re there. The lead actors, probably. Two people will die because of us.”

“Nobody is dying today,” Jack placates, slow and cautious. “The FBI will be there. If anything happens, we step in.”

“I don’t know, Jack. The FBI haven’t been very good at that so far.”

“Will.” Colder, sterner. Invading space, sharpening his tone. “I need you to be fully in this. Are you in it?”

“Oh, I’m in it. Can’t get out. And now Dr. Lecter is roped in it too.”

Hannibal says nothing, but it causes Jack to hesitate.

“Will. Please.” He shifts, arms crossing. “Where’s your head?”

“I don’t know, Jack.” Will is growing frustrated, uncoordinated. Fingers twitching and curling. Winston whines. “I’ll do it. But I don’t know.”

Heavy silence draws between them, like a thick blanket of winter. After a terse beat, Jack parts the snow.

“Alright. The play starts at two, so that gives us a couple hours to prepare. Here’s what’s going to happen.”

The sun dissipates quickly, replaced with swollen, bruising clouds. The weather has been erratic lately, lashing from cruel frost to fleeting warmth—prime romanticism, the gift of the sublime. Hannibal flourishes in the unpredictability.

They walk together but distanced, an invisible barrier between them. Today there is no need for romantic pretence; linked arms and societal dances, and he knows not to push his luck. Will is teetering on the edge of something unusual, something Hannibal cannot predetermine. He can only spectate, follow where the current rolls.

In conversation, Will is refreshed and prickly. Hannibal hadn’t realised how he missed the dry sparring, their back-and-forth witticisms. With every form Will takes, there is a new shape to admire—except something is still peculiar about his temperament. Something Hannibal can’t quite place.

“I do quite like the suit you picked,” he says, catching their reflection in a store glass panel. “In honesty, I’m surprised you picked a suit at all.”

“I’m humouring you.” Will snorts. “Take it as gratitude. Besides, we’re still supposed to dress up for the occasion.”

“Indeed.” A flicker of intrigue. “Do you recall last night’s dispute?”

“That’s why I chose a different suit.”

Hannibal smiles, thinly taunting. “So this is a result of obstinacy, rather than personal style.”

“Yes.” Will scoffs, low and breathy. “I can be petulant.”

“I am well accustomed to your petulance. I’ve built up a tolerance.”

“I can be worse.”

Will freezes before Hannibal can reply, fixed on an approaching figure.

“Will Graham and Dr. Lecter,” Freddie greets, lowering her camera. She is dressed in bold cheetah print, predatory fashion. “Fancy seeing you two here.”

“I didn’t know you were an avid fan of queer theatre, Freddie,” Will says, voice like flint.

While Hannibal dislikes Freddie Lounds, he appreciates how intensely she unmoors Will. Their collisions always bring boundless entertainment.

“Nor you, Mr. Graham. I didn’t know dating was in the bounds of doctor-patient ethics.” Her eyes are narrow and cutting. “Is that what this is? A secret liaison between psychiatrist and patient? Lusting over his lunacy? A little unorthodox, I’d think.”

“Your career thrives on unorthodoxy. You’d be destitute without it.”

“Then I should thank you for stabilising my income.” Freddie tilts her head, pleased with her retort. “Any breakthroughs on the Cupid case? I’d be careful if I were you, Dr. Lecter. Maybe Will Graham is feeling artistically inspired by his new affair.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Ms. Lounds,” he says neutrally. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have a play to attend.”

“Of course. I’d hate to interrupt a budding romance. Enjoy the show!” She smiles with teeth. Hannibal raises his head for the photograph he knows is coming.

As she lifts to shoot, Will shoves his hand into the camera and storms past, exaggeratedly brusque. This time, Hannibal doesn’t bother to filter his amusement.

“Rude!”

When they enter the theatre, Will stiffens similar to the symphony—rigid and forlorn, glasses fogged. His anxiety is pleasurably palpable, and Hannibal wants to hold him. Slip an arm through his, squeeze tight with little resistance, but still some. Brachial arteries throbbing in tandem.

“Do you know anyone here?”

“Some. I’m an occasional attendant of this theatre. It’s a magnificent art form, and I hold great appreciation for the staff here.”

“Let’s hope there aren’t any more Marthas.” Will shakes out two aspirin. Not speaking of Stephen and Gene only highlights their absence.

They purchase their tickets with minimal fuss, Hannibal skirting around known society. Once again, he books with Will’s paranoid inclinations in mind; a free lane to his side and a fire exit nearby.

“Comfortable?” Hannibal whispers in the hall.

“No. Expectant. Anticipatory,” Will replies. Understandably so.

What has good Laurent planned for them today?

They have arrived early, so it is a tense minute until the local chatter dims, lights fading to black. The air is thick with rich cologne and crammed bodies. Smooth carpet at his feet, cold leather at his back. Will bristles beside him. The performance is soon to commence.

Laurent thrives in the spotlight so naturally, he wishes to steal the show—the only question is how.

A low rumble, then crimson light floods onto the stage. Seeping smoke, the bright shade of arteries. Tendrils crawling towards the audience like coagulated blood. Then in one seamless glide, the curtains peel back.

Someone screams.

Two male bodies are posed onstage, suspended from the ceiling. Of course, the tell-tale arrows pierce their hearts—perfectly centred, not carelessly done like Gene Tanner, and their skin is sullied with artless mutilation. The positioning reminds Hannibal of Carracci’s *Venus, Adonis and Cupid*, sans the figure of Cupid. He almost smiles. This is a mockery of Laurent’s given title. This is humiliation of the FBI.

People scramble past them, pushing and shoving and screeching like animals, but Will doesn’t move. He is frozen, trancelike and still, ghouls behind his eyes. One sole focus; the universe distilled. Drinking in the art.

When the venue is empty, he stands. Glassy and hollow. Feet unsteady, muscles lax. Spellbound. Will is bewitched by the massacre.

Further, further, he is slowly swallowed by the sea of scarlet. Will climbs onto the stage and gazes, fingers tracing the corpse dips and curves—never touching, never too close. His fingers flirt with temptation, the saccharine sweetness of fresh blood. Ripe mortality. A burst, splashing plum.

It must be divination. Hematomancy. Stumbling through the foyer, this crumbling cathedral of bones.

His eyes close. Silence. Quietude. Pendulum swinging back and forth. Brutality and beauty, lustfully reconstructed. The yielding meat of Laurent Bell.

This magic is transient and fleeting. A rumble of noise brings the FBI charging inside, Jack as their tone-deaf ringleader.

Will snaps awake. Like ash, the spark dims and withers.

“He’s gone, Jack.”

There is a shadow in his voice, the echo of something aged and rotten. Jack is swift to hide his disappointment.

“Everybody, clear out. Call in Katz, Price, Z.”

There is a short scuffle, officers scurrying in and out like spiders. The hall lapses into a brief, waning silence.

“Will. Get off the stage.”

Expression vacant. Empty body, empty bones. The red strings of fate are knotted in his shoulders, laced between his ligaments. Dragging him through the world.

He steps down, limbs stiff like a puppet. Hannibal remains seated.

Jack frowns. “What did you see?”

The strings slacken, and so does Will.

“This is the penultimate.” Shaky hands, faltering lips. “A gift before the finale. A gift *to* the finale. It’s an ode to his mentor before it’s his turn. Something theatrical, artistic. Something in his style. All set up like a painting.”

Hope sparks, a small and tender flame.

“Tell me about the mentor.”

“He’s…” Will’s brows draw together, agitated. Frantic. Pieces falling together. “He’s an artist. A practised killer—we’ve probably seen his scenes before. “Prideful, egotistic, wants to raise others in his image. He kills brutally and dramatically and never for any conceivable reason.”

A bonfire, wooden buttresses. Scarce fire. Rising, slow but steady.

“He…” Will stops, and time stills.

Hope is a fleeting and fickle thing. It feels like the dawn of light, deluge after drought. Hannibal seizes hope by the teeth. He chews on starlight, permits faith to stain his gums.

Will takes a breath. “He’s the Chesapeake Ripper.”

And there it is.

Hannibal is blinded by reverence.

Flayed, skinned, slit, bared. Will has sliced him open and he’s spilling out like pomegranate, cracked ribs as white pith, blood beading into aril. This flame is contagious, a forest fire of wrath. Perhaps it scrapes heaven. Perhaps it scrapes further.

“What—what? The Chesapeake—Will?”

He is correct, correct, impossibly and undeniably correct. Open up, peer inside. Scathing eyes within viscera.

“I’m serious, Jack. It’s the Ripper. This is all about the Ripper.”

“How? What does this have to do with the Ripper?”

Will glistens the shade of mania, an opaline heart.

“The Ripper knows him—he was an authority figure, someone there to teach or help him. He moulded him into a killer. He encouraged it. And he’s—he listened but he’s angry, so he’s saving the Ripper till last, but this is his *gift* before it happens. It won’t, the Ripper won’t let it, but that’s what the Cupid killer is trying to achieve. It’s all theatre and art, just how the Ripper likes it. It’s cleaner than the previous—no unnecessary mutilation. Gift-wrapped.”

Remarkable. Hannibal can hardly contain himself.

“He’s done this before,” Will continues, mind uncoiling. “He’s raised killers, cultivated them. He’s in a real position of power to be able to do this. How many has he raised? How many has he done this to?”

“Will,” Jack says. “Hold on. Wait. Why is he targeting you?”

“I don’t know, Jack.” He smiles, half-grimacing. “I don’t know. Maybe the Ripper likes me.”

The Ripper would slay God and Satan for Will. He would carve out his heart and lay it at his feet.

“The Ripper likes you. Seriously?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Will’s eyes darken. “Remember Cassie Boyle?”

Jack blinks. “Hobbs’ copy cat.”

“The scene was gift-wrapped. That’s what I said. Without it, I wouldn’t have caught Garrett Jacob Hobbs. The only reason I did was because the copycat wanted me to.”

“Tell me why.”

“Because the copycat *liked* me. He wanted to see if I could read him, follow his clues. Marissa Schurr was the same, but that wasn’t about me, not directly—it was about Abigail. But he knew I cared for Abigail. He knew I—” Will stops, mind spinning. “The copycat. The Ripper. They’re the same.”

This feels like ascension; the sun melting on his fingertips. He is Icarus but his flight won’t thaw, his reign won’t crumble. He will tear past paradise with his teeth.

When Will doesn’t stop shaking, Hannibal knows what will happen next. It is predictable, inevitable. He has flipped the coin and rolled the die but the sides are identical, all outcomes are the same.

Jack steps back. “Dr. Lecter!”

He rushes forward. Like a doll, Will slumps and quivers, a stringless sack of flesh. Hannibal steadies him. Eyes clean, potent white. Blood bubbling at his tongue.

Will sinks forward like a corpse in his arms, and Hannibal catches him around the waist. The motion is faintly intimate. From a distance, it could seem an embrace. Will seizes in violent, brutal convulses and Hannibal guides his body to the floor in a swift arc, sweeping through red smoke. Softening his descent.

Hannibal uses his blazer as a pillow for Will then loosens his collar, allowing room to breathe. When he is propped on his side, Jack breaks the silence.

“Does he need an ambulance?”

This is unprecedented perfection. He didn’t plan for Will to be hospitalised this way but it works flawlessly, like shattered glass slotting together in his hands.

“Certainly.” Feigned irritation, as if he is shocked Jack hasn’t called one. “Now, please.”

As Jack dials the number, the BAU team swing through venue doors with light, cheery conversation. It is a sound that halts quickly, shock bloating its absence.

Predictably, Katz is the first to speak. “Will?”

“He had a seizure.” Hannibal doesn’t look up. “He’ll be okay. Jack is calling an ambulance.”

There is no tremble in her voice—only steady, trained composure. “Any way we can help?”

Hannibal sniffs the air, putrid with Will’s lost bladder, his sickly sweat. “A mop, please. There should be a janitor closet to the right where you walked in.”

Her steps are prompt and light, fading to echoes. In his periphery Price and Zeller stand stiffly, wondering if they should proceed with the scene.

“You can continue to the crime scene, if you wish,” Hannibal clarifies, not lifting his gaze. “Will is safe with me.”

They step past with extreme hesitance, and Hannibal continues to hold Will. Grazing his skin, brushing back his curls. He is so beautiful in disaster. A castle built from the rubble of wreckage, of tormented survival.

“They’re on their way,” Jack says. “Dr. Lecter… You heard what he was saying.”

“I did. What are your thoughts?”

“I don’t know what to think.” Jack watches Will, still quietly convulsing. “Will makes connections no one else can make. He doesn’t get this stuff wrong. I can’t dismiss what he tells me. So now I’m wondering—was he onto something here? Or was he just…”

Hannibal frowns. “He did have a seizure, Jack. You must keep in mind that causes severe confusion.”

“I don’t know.” Jack shakes his head. “This hasn’t happened before, has it, Doctor?”

Will writhes beneath him—easing into the postictal period. Leaving the eye of the storm.

“Are you asking if Will has a history of seizures? He hasn’t disclosed that information to me, but I’d assume not.”

“I’m asking if you’ve ever seen him talk about something and then react like…this.”

Hannibal senses suspicion. Brisk, biting. “Never. I’m as shocked as you are, Jack.”

The conversation is interrupted by a slow and muddy mumble. “Dr. Lecter.”

“Will. Hello.” Hannibal smiles down at him like something divine. “You had a seizure. I need you to repeat after me: my name is Will Graham.”

After a moment, Will repeats it.

“Good. I’m going to help you into a sitting position.” He does so, Will sluggishly complying. “Raise both of your arms.”

“What?” His mouth is ajar, tongue thick. Saliva wets the corner of his mouth.

“Raise both of your arms.”

A quiet groan, but he follows the instruction.

“More.” He doesn’t move. “More, Will. Well done. Now you may not feel like it, but I need you to smile.”

Will complies, a strained thing.

“Good. You didn’t have a stroke. The EMTs are on their way, Will. They will take you to the hospital for treatment.”

“Jack’s here.” Will drifts to Jack, who is staring at him with caution, blatant concern. Guilt. He feels responsible.

“Will,” he says, tone weighted. “You feeling okay?”

“No.” He turns back to Hannibal. “Treatment?”

“For your fever. What is the last thing you remember?”

“Freddie Lounds.” His voice is thin and fragile. “Outside. With Freddie Lounds.”

So he doesn’t remember. The seizure has obscured his recent memories, temporarily buried them in his subconscious. A slight disappointment, but if Hannibal pulls the correct strings this could work in his favour.

Jack is listening intently, as are Price and Zeller on the stage. Eyes down, but ears up. Before Hannibal can probe further, Katz is back with the mop in hand, letting in the paramedics.

“Ambulance is here,” she says coolly. Then, she softens. “Will. You’re awake.”

Still dazed, he doesn’t respond. His cheek presses against cool wood, physically turned from the scene, but the wash of red crawls into his hair, smoke thick on his clothes. The paramedics draw closer.

“Dr. Lecter,” he murmurs, and a question hangs in the space between them. Hannibal snakes a hand into sodden curls and refuses to speak, to reply. To respond in any tangible form. Fingers crawling through knotted hair, he squeezes, and that is the only answer he offers.

Will sighs into his hand. He seems content with the ambiguity.

like the innocent flower

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cold sterility. The stench of saline. Stale, unventilated air. Hannibal rather enjoys the atmosphere of hospitals—years of familiarity bring appreciation. There is a unique beauty here, this hazy limbo between life and death.

The following morning, Will isn't lingering in that limbo. He is unconscious but alive, inhaling sweet and steady lungfuls. Hooked up to several monitors, it is reassuring to have an objective measure of his well-being—this empirical sickness.

Hannibal counts Will's heartbeats, the grating beep of his pulse. Fragile, fleeting. The yawning pauses between. Everything withers in the absence of sound. Here, life is proved through calculation and machinery, not through shrines of flesh and bone. Mortality is only ink on paper; pixels on a bright, blinking screen.

Leaning forward, he hovers a hand near Will's nostrils. Hot breath, faint exhales. It tickles softly. For once he appears peaceful, fostered by an empty, dreamless sleep. There is mercy in unconsciousness. The womb of respite.

Hannibal pinches Will's nose so air stutters from his lips. Hannibal covers his mouth with his other hand, fingers locked and clamping at the cheeks. The hospital chair creaks. Will writhes, but only slightly. After five seconds, the beeping of his heart slows. Ten seconds and it drops further.

He doesn't stir. Death is patient, death is controlled. Death can crawl into every respite. It desecrates any womb.

At fifteen seconds, Will's heartbeat slows close to sounding the alarm and Hannibal pulls away, hand gliding to his chest instead. He presses down. It rises swift and falls swifter, compensating for the lost air.

Into the hollow of Will's chest, Hannibal taps an encoded message. What he cannot say with words he will write into flesh, the ultimate canvas of truth and verity. Allow the message to sink in, vibrate through his sternum. Ripple into atriums and ventricles, like salt water in his heart.

There are footsteps at the door. Hannibal leans back, hands quickly steepling at his lap.

"Hannibal."

Alana is here.

Her voice is small and breathy and laced with stern caution. Jack stands beside her, dripping with identical discomfort.

“Alana. Jack.” He feigns a sad smile. “It’s good to see you both.”

“Not like this.”

Melancholy drenches Alana. Her gaze, her gestures—they are soaked in it, spilling misery all over the floor. It is a colourful contrast to Jack, who wears his concern like steel armour.

“Certainly not,” he agrees. “The events of last night were an unprecedented disaster. From here, we must support Will as much as we can.”

“Do they know what the problem is?” Alana sits in the only free chair.

“Not yet. His temperature is 105 and his white blood cell count is twice the normal amount, yet they still can’t identify the source of the infection.”

From the sidelines, Jack steps in. “Do you think it's anything serious?”

Hannibal cannot resist the urge to pull at loose strings.

“I hope not. From a medical perspective, I’d say this is a result of his recent stress at work.” A polite, pointed glance. Minutely, Jack winces. “His immune system has crashed. Recovery will be a struggle for him.”

“Could it be neurological?” Alana asks, tapping her heel against the tile.

“The previous scans were inconclusive. Without further tests, it is impossible to tell.”

She leans closer to Will. Her perfume is different today, a mellow blend of vanilla and jasmine.

“It’s so hard to watch him like this. I never thought he’d get this bad. I never even imagined…”

“You cannot blame yourself, Alana.” Thick tone, calculated comfort. “There was nothing you could do to prevent this.”

“I know. But I still feel awful.” She pauses, briefly glancing at Jack. Insinuating that he should too. “Jack told me what Will said before the seizure. About the copycat. The Ripper.”

She doesn’t expand, so Hannibal nods. “A surprising conclusion.”

“Do you believe it?”

“I’m uncertain. I hesitate to dismiss Will’s insight, but he was visibly very disturbed at the time.”

Rhythmic beeps fill the silence that follows.

“He doesn’t remember it.” Jack shifts on his feet. “His own analysis. As psychiatrists, I need you two to help me out here—is it even credible? What’s going to happen if I bring it up to

Will? Another seizure?"

"Jack. Are you thinking of withholding that information?" Alana is calm, but her pitch heightens. She senses injustice, a further misuse of authority.

Expectantly, Jack's eyes slide to Hannibal. Unfortunately for Alana and Will, this is a perfect opportunity for self-interest.

"While I greatly respect Dr. Bloom's opinion," Hannibal says, "I believe telling him would be against Will's best interests. It could not only confuse him, being a highly unlikely hypothesis, but also cause a regression to his state of mind near the seizure."

"Hannibal—really?"

"He is in a fragile state, Alana. It would be unsafe to tell him until the infection is treated and Will can think coherently."

"So we don't tell him." Jack crosses his arms. "Not until he's thinking straight?"

"That is my recommendation."

"Jack! There are two psychiatrists in the room right now. What if he's right about the Ripper? Keeping that from Will… It's immoral. You can't do that to him."

"I trust Will," Jack says, slow and placating, "but I don't trust the seizure he had *immediately* after saying it, and the fact that he's conveniently blocked it out. He was rambling, Dr. Bloom—you didn't hear him. I need Will's mind when it is functioning, but until then? I can't do a thing."

Hannibal nods. "I believe telling him will only slow that process. Will can think extraordinarily under duress, but in this case it'd be both harmful to him and to the case."

"Thank you, Dr. Lecter. When his brain is actually working, we tell him. For now? We don't."

"You can't—I disagree with this completely." She is near-shouting but it lacks bite, signals surrender. Even with outrage boiling beneath, Alana is quick to recognise defeat.

"I apologise for that, Dr. Bloom," Jack says, morosely genuine. Though often misplaced, he is not without his morality.

The conversation soon dulls like the looming sky, swollen with varicose clouds. Hannibal stands.

"Although I hate to leave, I do have patients waiting so I must be on my way. Please notify me if anything changes with Will."

"Of course. Good to see you, Doctor." Jack nods. Alana doesn't say a word.

Storms are caustic and bloated with hate. For the rest of the day, Baltimore bears the weight of God's fury, spat down as filthy deluge and dewy petrichor. On the way from John Hopkins, Hannibal thinks it might flood—the roads are soaked in wrath. It threatens to fill up, spill over.

He spends the day drifting in warm, dusky nectar. Patients come and go with pedestrian mundanities, and then nothing is left but to stare at Will's seat and recreate his shadow.

It is in dim lustre that he sketches, hardly needing light at all. Will's curves and edges are knitted in his ligaments, the joints of his fingers. Melted into memory, the flicking wrist and pinched pencil. His scent permeates the walls—not the stink of sickness, but the musky strength of unaltered masculinity—dogs and forests and fishing tie metal. Will bleeds from the tip of his pencil, dyes the page venous grey.

Will in pain and in pleasure. Concave ribs, a cleaved aorta. The victim of a crime and the criminal aggressor. It paints a delightful picture. Hannibal lifts his sketch to the light, passively pleased with his work, and then he stops.

Jack is calling. Will must be awake. For the sake of anticipation, he answers on the third ring.

When Hannibal returns, he is indeed awake.

Slumped at the table, Will watches the storm from a cramped, unwashed window. His brows are tight but his face is calm and moderately tranquil.

"Dr. Lecter."

Their eyes meet in the window reflection and Will spares a small smile. When Hannibal slips into the seat opposite, his own smile feels sickeningly sincere.

"Will. It's good to see you awake."

"It's good to see you here." Will meets his eyes, soft but direct. "Nurses said you were here almost all night. And all morning."

"The nurses are correct." Hannibal drinks in his countenance. Bruised under-eyes, a slight tenuity to his cheeks. Forehead bandage replaced with cheap gauze. He wears a hospital robe over his shirt and, surprisingly, seems as comfortable as one can be in this situation. The greatest shock is that his IV drip is still intact.

“Thanks for that.” Will rubs a hand across his face. “You didn’t have to. I was knocked out. I wouldn’t have known.”

“I wanted to,” Hannibal says with truth. Too much truth. “I was worried for you, Will.”

Harsh but quiet, he laughs. “Well. Here I am. All in one piece.”

They soak in forthcoming silence and the heady sizzle of ‘chicken soup’. Hannibal considered using ingredients to worsen the encephalitis, but ultimately decided against it: Will must be lucid tomorrow. Delirium strips violence of all meaning. He must be fully conscious, entirely aware. He must feel the kill like divinity in his bones.

“This is delicious. Thank you.” Will eats with gentle radiance. “Funny how it’s still raining. I’ve been watching all day—still hasn’t let up.”

Hannibal stares through the window. The city is blackened by downpour and fog.

“In Christianity, rain is a symbol for cleansing and rebirth. The Hopi believe it to represent harmony and balance in nature. In Chinese culture, rain embodies abundance and prosperity.”

“I don’t think it’s any of those,” Will murmurs. “More like pathetic fallacy. Foreshadowing.”

“A pessimistic outlook. You reflexively steer towards the negative. The glass is always half-empty, never half-full.”

He scoffs, taking another bite. “Half-full sounds wrong. The glass is halfway to being emptied.”

“Who says it isn’t halfway to being filled? You naturally assume the worst. It’s a product of your fear.”

“It’s the cause of my fear. Everything bad, everything that could be bad.” Will pauses, spoon in hand. “Everything in me that could be bad.”

The concept is incorrigible.

“I don’t believe anything bad lies within you, Will.” An honest truth. “Again, I believe it’s down to your perception. You perceive your inner desires as rotten, thus believing that you are rotten. This is a fatal misconception.”

The air shifts, black and aphotic.

“That’s bad advice, Doctor. Easily misconstrued.” Slowly, he swallows the last of his soup. “You don’t know what lives inside of me.”

“I’d like to find out.”

Will lapses into uneasy silence, fingers clenching the spoon. A yellow pallor swallows his skin and he hums, deep in the fissure of thought.

“I’m aware of missing memories,” he says suddenly. “Gaping punctures in my mind. I need you to help me fill them in.”

“Of course.” Hannibal puts down his spoon. “Describe the shapes they’ve left behind, their outlines. The glint of light on broken glass.”

“The theatre. I remember walking in, meeting Freddie Lounds. Arguing with you about… suits. Next thing I remember is being carried out on a stretcher. What happened between that?”

He blinks. “Did Jack not tell you?”

Rainfall fills the void between their words.

“No. He was gone when I woke up. Only stayed long enough to tell the nurses and you. Alana was here longer.”

“And what did she tell you?”

“She told me to wait for you or Jack to tell me.”

“She knows what happened.” Alana purposefully invoked suspicion. How sly of her. “I must be truthful with you, Will; I am reluctant to share the details. It was a rather gruesome ordeal.”

“Oh, I know gruesome. I've got gruesome down pat.”

Hannibal pretends to hesitate. “Very well. When the performance began, the curtains pulled back to reveal the two lead actors. They were murdered, mutilated and posed onstage, and the sight caused you to instantly seize. The FBI entered soon after and an ambulance was called.”

Will tongues his cheek in a stretched, thoughtful pause.

“Huh,” he mumbles. “You have any pictures?”

“It would be bad for you to look so soon; I have personally advised Jack Crawford against it. My apologies if that comes as bad news.”

Frustration is cut short by gaping disbelief. “You said that to Jack and he listened?”

“Yes.” Hannibal lightens with amusement. Will reflects the sentiment, laughing sharply.

“I don’t even want to know how that happened.”

“It was a rather unenthusiastic agreement.”

“How considerate of you all.”

“You are always in my considerations, Will. You factor into boundless decisions that I make.” Before he can dissect that, Hannibal continues, “You have soup on your cheek.”

Will shifts to clean it but Hannibal is faster, thumb sliding onto skin. It sparkles, brief intimacy. He lets the touch linger before swiping the splash away—an entirely unnecessary display, but Hannibal is curious how he will react.

“Dr. Lecter.” Will stays still as stone. “You keep doing that.”

“What is it that I’m doing?”

“Being…touchy. I know I’m not imagining it.” He probes his bandage, the wound hissing beneath. “Ever since I started staying at your home.”

Cautious tone, gentle treading. “Does it bother you?”

“It confuses me.” His eyes crawl to the graze on Hannibal’s cheekbone, the faint palm punctures.

“I would never intend to confuse you, Will.” Not without purpose. “I tend to be affectionate with people I hold dear. If you wish me to, I will stop.”

“You hold me dear.”

“I do.”

Will almost scoffs. “You bit me in the head.”

“You bit me in the hand,” Hannibal counters.

“Not exactly a fair exchange.”

“Yet bites were traded nonetheless.”

This conversation is absurd, but the absurdity seems embraced mutually. It is refreshing to finally clear the air.

“You aren’t a normal psychiatrist, Dr. Lecter, and you aren’t a normal friend. I don’t know how to classify our relationship.”

“An impossible task. You and I defy categorisation.”

Will’s eyes slide back to Hannibal’s cheek, the healing slice. Not serious enough to require dressing.

“Your affection,” he says, voice low. Expression lurid. “Is it one-sided? What happens if someone tries to return it?”

Hannibal stills. “It depends on the circumstances.”

They both know what Will is going to do. He is wrathful in the face of disparity.

Hannibal sinks into the hand hooking his jaw, the thumb at his cheek still sticky from receding fever. Will’s nail skirts along the lesion, a quiet ache throbbing in its wake. He is

testing the boundaries, sparing a taste of what will come.

Will regards Hannibal with swollen, glassy pupils. Then he strikes.

Dullness gives way to a flood of fire, the shrieking sting of a split wound. Hannibal doesn't look away as Will's face contorts, mouth slackening, tongue wet. Nails digging deeper, the wail of a wound. Hot, sweet droplets racing down like tears.

Only to please Will, Hannibal hisses through clenched teeth. The assault heightens. From the right hands, pain and pleasure are synonymous.

He is stretching the wound, tearing him open, this delicate sunder of capillaries. Keen copper and yielding flesh. The bruised bone beneath.

A crack of thunder sounds. It rattles the window and Will snaps from his trance, sharply pulling away. From his fingertips splashes a single bead of blood, falling like a teardrop.

The silence is oppressive and palpable. Will stares at his hand as if it were alien.

"I don't know why I did that," he says eventually. "Sorry. I don't—God. I don't know where that came from."

He is hiding in dialogue, avoiding eyes. Hannibal smiles to strain the lesion. "I permitted you to do it. How do you feel?"

"Dr. Lecter, I can't—" He stands up, hand still far away from him, scrambling for the sink. Breaths quick, short, nearing hyperventilation. "You shouldn't have let me do that. You shouldn't have let me. Are you okay?"

"You enjoyed it," Hannibal says. "Never berate yourself for indulgence, Will. You must make peace with your desires."

"You need a—a bandage. And water."

Hannibal smiles fondly, joining him at the sink and dabbing at his injury. "Do you have any spares?"

"No." Will scrubs off the blood. "Have to ask a nurse."

"Then I must make do." He pulls out a handkerchief, pressing firmly against the slit. It is already coagulating. "Let's sit."

They sit back down, Will hurriedly wiping the table clean and dumping the tissues. His marred flesh is the only remaining evidence.

"I'm confused," he admits, and the air ripens with opportunity.

"Do you recall the grounding activity we tried last week?"

Will blinks. "The clock?"

“Yes.” Hannibal offers pen and paper from his blazer pocket. “I’d like you to draw it daily with me. When performed as a regular exercise, it may reign you in the present moment. Stabilise your moorings.”

“Seems a little excessive.”

“Perhaps. I’d like you to indulge me.”

He anticipates resistance, futile arguments of unnecessity and irrelevance, but no protests come. Eyes flitting to Hannibal’s cheek, Will takes the paper and draws.

As predicted, it is still warped and comically Daliesque, though the inaccuracy is not as severe today. While his executive function and visual-spatial awareness are impacted, the treatment is temporarily restoring them. Perfect—by tomorrow he should be capable of killing consciously and lucidly. With melodic, unrivalled intent.

Even so, Will is born from unpredictability. Hannibal can’t wait to see what he will do.

Hannibal leaves the hospital in the cloak of night, and it takes arduous efforts to suppress a sigh when Laurent squeezes under his umbrella.

“Hello, Laurent,” Hannibal says dryly. “This is a remarkable coincidence. Did you forget your umbrella?”

“Didn’t think it’d still be raining.” His curls are dark and damp, falling into his eyes. “Bad timing on my part. I’m soaked.”

“It has been raining almost all day. A strange assumption to make.”

“I guess so.”

They weave through cars and streetlights, a world hazed in rainfall. Hannibal watches him from the corner of his eye.

“Is there a particular reason you sought me, Laurent?”

“I came here as a reminder.” Always candid, always flat-toned. Trying to mirror nonchalance. “I’m going to kill you tomorrow.”

“You can certainly try. I welcome it.”

If the reaction catches Laurent off guard, he does not show it. “Someone sounds a little too enthusiastic. By the way? I’d love to know what happened to your face.”

“And I’d love to know what happened to your manners. Nevertheless, we all must maintain some mystery.”

“Elusive. As always.” He kicks a stone, flatly sullen. “Anything to say on my recent work? Or are you going to stay silent all the way through the car park?”

Hannibal sighs, handkerchief still pressed on his cheek. “It was creative and artistically inspired, and I enjoyed your mockery of the ‘Cupid’ title. Even so, it lacked passion and originality; I heard my influence was painted all over it.”

“It *was* dedicated to you.” Far away, the soaked city rumbles. “Considering where we are right now, I suppose Will Graham didn’t like it.”

A flash of pride. “He saw through you. Stripped you to the bone, Laurent.”

“Good for him. I bet you enjoyed that.”

“Of course I did. It was extraordinary.” Hannibal wets his lips. “While I regret to cut this conversation short, we have reached my car.”

He examines Laurent, broad build and limp arm. He is dressed rather shabbily in another suit, a winter coat thrown over. Always trying to be something greater than himself. “I politely assume you don’t need a ride?”

He shakes his head. “No. I don’t know. I’m still trying to understand you.”

“An impossible task.” His tone is not unkind. “You shouldn’t bother.”

“Can’t help it. You only… You only see me as a plaything, or some experiment gone wild. I know you resent me. But back then, when you went through all that effort… I just want to figure out why.”

Hannibal raises his brows. Resentment requires active consideration of a person, intense emotion felt towards them.

“If that were true, I would’ve killed you a long time ago, Laurent. I harbour no resentment towards you—only mild distaste for your character flaws.”

“Oh, thanks,” he grumbles. “That’s reassuring.”

“To tell the truth, I feel completely impartial towards you as a person. You are an ex-patient, and I hold neutrality for all my patients.”

“Do you hold neutrality for Will Graham?”

Hannibal sharpens his gaze. “Will Graham isn’t my patient. Why do you ask?”

“I want to understand your affection for him.”

“You are jealous.”

“Not of you personally. Of the both of you. The image you create.”

Pride sparks in his abdomen. “We do make quite the pair.”

Laurent doesn’t reply, even as Hannibal draws his umbrella and climbs into his car.

“Goodbye, Laurent,” he says, and then there is a flash of movement. Laurent seizes the door.

“I don’t understand it. How do you—how can you love him? How can he love *you*?”

“Laurent.” His voice lowers in warning. “It is time for you to leave.”

“He doesn’t know you. He doesn’t—what the hell are you going to do once he does?”

Briefly, Hannibal scans his surroundings: no people, no witnesses. If this escalates, he can handle it as he pleases.

“Let go of the door, please.”

His gaze is strange and dimming, a dying hearth of passion. Contemplation passes, and Laurent releases his grip.

“Thank you. Have a pleasant evening, Laurent.”

Pulling out of the parking space, he studies Laurent in the windshield mirror. Despite his age, he seems young, painfully juvenile. The unfortunate epitome of wasted potential.

For a fleeting moment, he wonders about Will, if he could turn out similarly. Days and nights of careful plotting, effort and deliberation—what if he isn’t the man Hannibal thinks he is?

No. There is no point in such negativity, entertaining these acrid thoughts. He will awaken soon, and everything will align and the universe shall sparkle with the magnitude of it all. Hannibal is certain of it.

He is. He must be.

Chapter End Notes

only one chapter left..... wowow

metempsychosis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The following morning, Hannibal sets his plan in motion.

He visits Will before work and scatters hints like breadcrumbs, seeping faux distress through cool composure, a false sea of calmness. Although he says nothing, Will identifies the facade with itching intuition, taking note of every abnormality. Every slip of stress. Feigned anxiety drips through the fabric of Hannibal's outer veil and Will laps up the excess like a dog.

The rain is still unrelenting as he drives to the hospital, medicinal soup and notebook in the passenger seat. The clock test means nothing to him now but it is curiosity for curiosity's sake —for once, there is no harm in sating his appetite.

"Good evening, Will."

As always, Will sees him first through the window, and from that Hannibal sees himself. His reflection shines coolly cordial, a rigidity in his shoulders only Will would recognise. The gauze pad mars his cheek but he preens at the sight; their injuries match. Now they are equal in their mutilation.

"Dr. Lecter," Will says, expression softening. "Hello."

They eat together in easy silence but Hannibal is cautious with his language, strict with his tone. It stirs taut tension between them, a gaping fracture in the conversation and Will grows shakier at eye contact, brittle with his words. He knows something is wrong and he knows Hannibal is hiding it. Perhaps this fact unsettles Will the most.

"You seem on edge today, Will," Hannibal observes, despite Will only reflecting the perceived unrest.

"Me? I'm always on edge. Thought you knew that one by now." Sarcastic, teasing. Avoiding the accusation.

Hannibal sharpens his gaze and Will surrenders.

"Okay. Well, I could say the same about you."

He blinks, seemingly caught off-guard. "And why is that?"

"All day you've been acting strange. Different." Will shakes his head as if in disbelief. "Almost *nervous*, and you're trying to hide it."

"Nervous."

"Nervous," he repeats. Hesitant but curious. "Something on your mind, Doctor?"

Faintly proud, Hannibal tilts his head. “As always, nothing passes your scrutiny. To tell the truth, there is something on my mind. I’m meeting someone surprising tonight, and in a rather peculiar environment.”

“Oh?” His attention is piqued, but Hannibal doesn’t continue. “Go on. Can’t say that and not elaborate.”

“Can’t I?” He smiles, a mild but strained falsehood.

“No.” When there is no reply, Will scoffs, “What, want me to draw a clock to prove I’m *grounded* enough to hear?”

With a flicker of amusement, Hannibal presents the pen and paper. “If you’d like.”

“Oh, seriously?”

He half-laughs but his eyes are steely, narrowing as he grabs the sheet and sketches. The outcome is imperfect but a significant improvement nonetheless—the IV has greatly heightened his clarity. “There. Satisfied?”

“Thank you for indulging me.” Hannibal feigns hesitation. Returning the quid pro pro. “The person I’m meeting tonight is an ex-patient. Someone I treated five years ago and haven’t seen since.”

Will taps bitten nails on the table. “Okay. Why?”

“He appeared at my front door this morning completely distraught. At a loss of what to do I welcomed him inside, and he spoke of wanting to reconcile with those he’d wronged in the past.”

“What’d he do?”

“Nothing extreme.” Hannibal stares outside. The city is blurred by rain. “I won’t betray doctor-patient confidentiality, but he was averse to treatment and refused to put in the effort to change. Due to this, I was subjected to repeated verbal abuse until he eventually quit therapy. I haven’t seen him since. At this point in the conversation I was running late to see you, so I politely requested to postpone our conversation for the evening.”

“So you’re meeting him soon.”

“We agreed to meet in the Baltimore Basilica. A religious man, he felt uncomfortable intruding my home again and preferred to speak in a place of God to ensure honesty. Similar to confession, I’d presume.”

Instinct sharpens his demeanour. “That’s unusual.”

Hannibal agrees, “He is a rather unusual man. Even so, I am comfortable with it. Repentance is a primal urge of the guilty and today, he has plead me to be his priest.”

“You want to go?”

“I do, although I’m apprehensive. This is a bizarrely new experience and while I’m willing to help, the situation brings uncertainty.” Hannibal glances at the clock. “To tell the truth, it’s near time for me to leave.”

Will is deep in thought. Hannibal rises to stand.

“What’s his name?” he asks at last.

“Earl Buntell. Why do you ask?”

Will frowns, handing over the empty tupperware. “Just curious. Good luck—and thanks for the soup.”

“Of course.” Another curt smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Will.”

“Bye, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal leaves the hospital room with fervour burning hot in his marrow. By the time Will solves the anagram, calls Jack and fights his way out of the hospital, Hannibal should be far ahead. Perfect. That leaves plenty of time to reach the basilica and allow Laurent to have his fun—only enough to enrage Will upon entering.

He tears off the gauze pad and swiftly discards it. Hannibal cannot wait. Tonight will be monumental.

When he steps out of the car the ground is drenched and thickly flowing, a river of clotted blood. Hannibal studies the basilica, towering and majestic, soaked in pale moonlight and chasmic ink. Somewhere far, low crickets chirp. Spiderwebs shine within shrubbery. The world is dewy and bright, gleaming the proud shade of nacre.

Tonight, there will be rebirth in the palm of God. Hannibal enters the vestibule, old doors groaning in protest, steps echoing loudly through the foyer. He paces with purpose, with intent. With guttural instinct and passion.

Kaleidoscopic starlight spills through the stained glass, softening the shadow of pillars and pews and Hannibal feels encroached in this religion, a ceremonial pawn. Swallowed whole by the mouth of worship.

The clang of whetted steel, the scrape of knotted rope. Laurent stands at the sanctuary with his back bared but head tilting.

“Hello, Laurent.”

Slowly, he turns.

Laurent is dressed in another misfit two-piece, a red tie hung loosely from his collar. For once he is shrouded in light instead of shadow, pooling in his eyes and sharpening his jaw. It suits him. His features always clash with the darkness.

“Dr. Lecter.” He inclines his head and the dusk shifts with him. “You’re early. And you’re missing a friend.”

Hannibal stands tall between the pews. He breathes in metal and dust, heavy particles swathed in the air. “Will Graham will be here soon. In the meantime, what do you plan to do with me?”

Laurent ties off a knot. “Well. Must be eager to find out, coming at this time. I’ll tell you. You’re special, Dr. Lecter, so I’m not going to use my arrows until the very last moment. They can be the finishing touch. My magnus opus.”

“And before then?”

“I’m going to mutilate you,” he says calmly. “You’ll bleed out and grow confused, lethargic. Compliant. You’ll look like a mess. Hell. Will Graham will be in for a shock when he walks in.”

He will kill Laurent when he walks in. There is no other outcome. This cannot end without bloodshed.

“And if I don’t comply?” he asks, probing the borders of his ego.

“I’ll make you.” Laurent stares. “Have you forgotten the botulinum? Is that why you came here all on your own in what—a three piece suit?”

“I came here because I was curious.”

“Of course you were,” he snarls, a beastly thing. “That’s why you messed up my head. But I’m not mad anymore. It’s only fair I mess you up in return. And yes, Dr. Lecter—that includes the suit.”

A shame, but Hannibal chose a lesser favourite predicting this. “I’d prefer you didn’t.”

“I don’t care what you’d prefer. Lay down on the altar, or I’m going to make you.”

It is a pathetic threat but he complies wordlessly, stepping into prismatic light.

The alter is frigid and he is too tall for it—after heaving himself up, his arms and legs hang noose-like over the sides, belly bared to the vaulted ceiling. To the judgement of God. This is the extent he goes for Will.

“Say, Dr. Lecter.” Laurent circles the altar, blade in hand. “How late is Mr. Graham going to be?”

White heat swells in his gut. Will should be on his way right now, boiling with panic and potential bloodlust in the back of a taxi.

“About fifteen minutes or so. You should act quickly, Laurent. Time is slipping from your fingers.”

“I don’t like that you keep telling me what to do.” The blade glints like a promise. “Talking as if you’re in control here. As if whatever magical plan you’ve conjured is going to save you. It won’t, Dr. Lecter. Your arrogance can’t save you from basic biology. You willingly walked into a death sentence.”

The stone digs into his scapula. In lieu of a reply, Hannibal says, “I’m taking off my suit, Laurent. If you have any—”

A flash of light, of colour. His shoulder screams.

“No.” Laurent twists the knife deeper—mildly concerning for his brachial artery. “You—you aren’t taking me seriously.”

Hannibal doesn’t wince when the knife rips out and slices down his middle, tearing through his waistcoat and shirt to break skin. Flesh yields. Pain is hot and cruel and bursting. Laurent grows angrier, angrier still, stabbing and slicing and slitting and—

Laceration. Puncture. Metal scraping viscera, butchering nerves. It hurts because Hannibal is not immune to agony. It hurts because Will still hasn’t arrived and Hannibal is as mortal as anyone, a victim to time and longing, to knives and bloodshed. It hurts because he is hideously, hatefully human, and no pretence can erase that.

Time slows and spurs, oscillating between gaping seconds and fleeting hours. Everything is sticky, everything is wet. There is an undulating roar in his ears, rushing blood, a declining circulatory system. Vision dim. Breath stuttering. Everything loses definition.

He cannot classify the gashes anymore. He is a mass of wounds, a world of injury. Necrosis dawning like a rising sun. Body screeching, hot and cold. Arterial spray on the altar. Water into wine, wine into water.

Eventually, it stops. The consequent anguish feels like sanctum.

“Okay. Here’s what I’m going to do,” Laurent rasps. He is breathy, exhilarated. Pupils bloated with pleasure. “I’m going to hang you up, and we are going to wait patiently until Will Graham arrives.”

Silently, Hannibal relents to the burn of rope around his wrists and ankles, this startling halt of circulation. Laurent is cruel with his body, flipping him over and slamming him down. Briefly, he pauses to admire his work. Then he pulls.

Hannibal ascends and it is nauseating. Gravity, brutal and coarse, tugs his body down while the rope hauls upwards, a conflict of physics and feeling. Soon he is suspended midair and blood pelts down like warped tears, cruel and sticky and wet on the altar. Fabric clings to him. This high up, he is branded with an impression of radiance and sin. Persisting in purgatory.

Still, his pulse is mostly measured and his heart calm. His faith in Will is ecclesiastical—he will come. He must.

When time festers like rotting fruit, Hannibal knows he is growing delirious. Between the pain and lost haemoglobin thoughts are impossible to weave together, only churning static left in his brain.

The crash of heavy doors. Stumbling footsteps, shallow breath, the click of a safety catch.

Is he here?

Hannibal peers down. Hair mussed and gun drawn, Will is dressed in his typical attire, impossibly small from this height. He is here, he is finally here, and he is beautiful.

“Hannibal!”

The sound, his sound—it pours into his ears like aural manna. Hannibal cannot bear it. He may shatter from this miracle.

“Mr. Graham.” Laurent is speaking. Imperious tone, steeped in vanity.

Will’s gaze settles on Hannibal, suspended like something sacrificial. Carmine coagulates beneath him, a bedding of violence and patience and love, that diseased word. He is slit open with love.

“It’s wonderful to finally—”

A gunshot cracks.

There is a long, taut pause. A splutter. Low, throaty choking.

Another gunshot.

Will charges at Laurent. He pins him to the ground with a hiss or a growl or something else entirely, arms pulling back and blazing with hate. Satan in his teeth. God in his fists. Punch after punch after punch, bones cracking and snapping and smashing, blood splattering holy tile.

It happens without screaming, without protest. Only the miserable choke of a ruined larynx. Ragged breath, shallow and heavy, quick and slow—until someone stops.

Everything grows quiet.

The basilica is still and warm, like the jaded glow of summer mornings. The spring thaw of frigid snow.

Divinity, Hannibal thinks. It must be. It can be no other.

Will runs to untie Hannibal, nearly slipping in cruor. He fumbles with the first knot and there is a sharp lapse of gravity, almost an instant plunge. Will heaves the rope back, lowering

Hannibal stiffly and cautiously, eyes trained on the blood bathed beneath.

His legs give way when he lands. Hannibal collapses behind the altar and slams his head against stone. Hardly the dignified descent he was aiming for.

Will rushes over, unknotting his wrists and ankles. Frantically scanning his wounds. “Hannibal.”

“Will.” The world is blurry, but he spits the name like something seraphic. “Left thigh. Femoral artery.”

Will sheds his jacket and ropes it around his thigh. He is damp and quivering all over so Hannibal guides his hands, grazed knuckles and filthy nailbeds. There is no spare scalpel to clean them today.

When it is done, they cling to each other like animals. Will leans into him, hands firmly pressing on his soaked thigh and stomach. Hannibal grips his stuttering waist and slick nape, fingers crawling up to his jaw. Foreheads touching, noses grazing, they inhale the same heat. The same poison. Their fingers prune with matching blood.

“He’s dead?”

“I killed him.” Will trembles, but he is gloating. “I killed him.”

Hannibal melts into his touch, the cold wet of his hands. He wants to fuse his soul so deeply into Will’s that he forgets where his own began. “How did it make you feel?”

A silence. Will swallows the air between them in greedy gulps.

“Righteous.” He sinks into Hannibal, lips scraping the cheek fissure. “Omnipotent.”

Hannibal squeezes his neck tighter, breathing into the concavity. Will’s pulse, pounding and pounding. His own, a lazy and fluttering thing.

“You were godly.”

Will digs in his fingers into Hannibal, slipping painlessly into slick punctures. “I felt like God.”

Hands slide to Will’s face, smearing damp crimson. Blood in his hair, staining his skin. Glimmering like ichor in the night.

“He deserved it. I’d kill him again and again. I wouldn’t stop.”

His mouth is lax with lust. Saliva spills from the corner, seeping into Hannibal’s cheek gash and Will wipes it with his lips. Cutting and tender.

Breathing the same air, panting into the same wounds. It is grotesque and gluttonous and evidence of God.

“Remarkable,” Hannibal whispers, resting his teeth on Will’s lip and sucking sweetly at blood. A kiss, spreading his rot. Heat swells in his abdomen, sparks in his loins—this hideous carnality.

Canine deep, he works his tongue through the slit of Will’s lips, inhaling his exhalations. A low whine sounds and it is impossible to tell who from, impossible to separate their teeth and tissue. This coalescence of soul and body.

He kisses and Will kisses back. It is nothing tender but it is sacred. It is transcendental.

The moment is pierced by faint sirens in the distance, the rumble of police smashing into the foyer. Will glances up and a sparkling string of saliva hangs between them, shimmering in the light.

Hannibal doesn’t look away from Will. Not as the world spins into madness, as his vision bursts white.

“Bring in the paramedics!”

When his sight returns, Jack is present. Concern ages him, slices deep into their sacred bubble.

“Dr. Lecter. Dr. Lecter? What happened here?”

“Cupid killer.” His words are surprisingly slurred. “Waiting for Will. He wanted to kill us… together.”

Jack must recall what Will said about the fifth kill, what it symbolises. Hannibal sees it in his weathering features. When he is more coherent he must persuade Jack from the notion, but if Will remembers and comes to the same conclusion…

The future is foggy but bright. Hannibal is glutted with hope.

When the paramedics haul him onto the stretcher, Will’s absence gapes like a lost limb. It is an eternity until he scrambles back, grasping for his hand as they carry him out the basilica. Will doesn’t let go and no one can make him. They are attached like one being, one monster.

His ears fill slowly with the hollow drumming of wings. His vision dims, static and colour and light.

With Will, he is complete. With Will, he is whole.

Beeping machines. The steady hum of electricity. Warmth curled around his hand, sticky with love.

The world aches. But only faintly.

Memories come lazily, like a carcass drifting down a stream—he must be heavily medicated. Best to be cautious with his tongue.

Hannibal focuses on internal sensations first: the sluggish pounding of his head, the faint pulse in his abdomen. The stiffly squeezing expanse of his thighs. Throbbing shoulders, parched throat.

Slowly, he blinks into the external. White walls, white ceiling. An IV stand at his side and oh, at the other—the sole object of his attention. Will bears bruised under-eyes and pasty skin yet he is awake and safe and saintly, unharmed in the hospital chair. No words are spoken but the air shifts when their eyes meet, beating with words unsaid.

Will wets his lips but stays silent, hesitant. Conversation is a lump in his throat and it knots painfully when he swallows.

“Will,” Hannibal says, tongue thick and mouth dry. His consonants are unfortunately slurred.

“Dr. Lecter.”

Jagged and brutal. The rejection pierces to bone. Will has retreated into the safety of distance, a gaping fissure slit between them. A lesion desperate for stitching.

It is cruel for Will to only use his forename in duress. Ha-nni-bal, a stanza of three, syllables sharply serrated on the tongue. Sung by Will like a sonnet, a sickening sestina.

“I’m pleased to see you here.”

“You stayed with me.” Will averts his eyes. “I had to return the favour.”

Hannibal studies his twitching jaw, the overgrown stubble. “You didn’t. I appreciate that you did.”

They both smell of iron and must. His nose burns with the potency.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“I do,” he says, although his recollections are hazy. “How long was I asleep?”

“Thirteen hours.” Will rubs his fingers together. “You fell asleep in the ambulance. Had them all worried.”

Hannibal musters a faint, sly smile. “Were you?”

“What do you think?”

“I’d like you to tell me.”

A pointed, disapproving frown. Hannibal could split open from endearment.

“Of course I was.” Both hostility and affection lace his tone. “But I didn’t think you’d die. Couldn’t let myself believe that—it didn’t seem like a very ‘Dr. Lecter’ thing to do. And you didn’t.”

“Of course not.” His chest feels tight. “It wouldn’t be very ‘Dr. Lecter’ at all.”

A short stutter and then their hands interlink, fingers lacing together. They are living proof of inseparability, of something mythological. Hannibal imagines that if they were wrenched apart, the skin would stretch like elastic and snap back like a spring.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” Will chokes out in one spilt breath. His voice is smaller than ever. He ducks his head to smother the vulnerability.

Hannibal leans in as close as he can, restricted by a wave of nausea. “Without you, I wouldn’t be.”

“I—I killed for you.”

Magnitude strikes through the smog of painkillers. Will killed Laurent Bell for him—mutilated his body with bare hands. He did it wholly and fully and with truth, with love.

Did the plan work? Have the pieces fallen into place? Hannibal struggles to formulate a response, words strange and awkward in his mouth but bleeding from his heart.

“And for that I am eternally grateful.” There will never be a day he is not. “Tell me. Did it feel like killing Hobbs?”

“It felt *better*,” Will spits. “Because it was about you. Because it was for you.”

Hannibal could explode into stardust and ether. Will is wrapped around his finger, melded so passionately into his image. Even like this, he reigns complete and utter control.

“It was intimate. Personal.”

“Yes,” he says through clenched teeth. Then he stops. “You know. I remember the night of the theatre.”

Brilliant. Hannibal tilts his head in permission.

“I, uh. I thought Hobbs’ copycat was the Chesapeake Ripper—that Bell’s mentor was the same. That his next attempted kill would be the Chesapeake Ripper.”

The words are slow to register, but Hannibal understands. “I was the next attempted kill. Your conclusion points to me.”

“Yes.” Will scrubs a hand over his face. “But that can’t be right. It isn’t—it doesn’t make sense.”

“I have to agree.”

Shakily, Will exhales. “It’s eating at me, but my head is too clouded. I can’t think it through. They want me to stay longer in the hospital—something about the fever. Probably explains it.”

“I would also have to agree.” A pointed, narcotic smile. “You must prioritise your health, Will.”

Will stares at Hannibal, scoffing at the irony. He is searching for cracks and loose threads but there is nothing to be found; his costume is seamless. Will must open him up with claws and teeth.

“What did Laurent Bell say to you?” he asks suddenly. “It was twenty-three minutes while you hung and bled. That’s what forensics says. What did he say to you?”

The discomfort is easy to feign. “He was lucid but rambling. I didn’t understand all of it. He spoke of Camille, his ex-partner, then of you and I. He…” An unsteady pause. “He told me what he was going to do before he did it. He made me walk to the altar, lay down on my back. And then… Forgive me. Then—”

“That’s enough,” Will cuts in. He is being considerate, but suspicion still lingers wonderfully in his crevices. “It’s fine. You don’t have to say the rest. I’m not interrogating you.”

“Thank you.”

Radiant sunlight streams in from open windows. At last, it has stopped raining.

“I just… I’m confused.” Will wipes a damp hand on his leg. “Dr. Lecter. Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

He speaks without spite or disdain, eyes wider than usual. Will is grasping onto trust with weak hands, desperate for mooring. Something to hold, to cling to. Something that will not fade away.

“My heart is bared, Will,” he murmurs, tightening his grasp. “I’m being as honest as I know how to be.”

Caught in a column of light, Will flickers with hesitation and then melts into acceptance. He is trapped, he is cocooned. He is seized in the silk of deception Hannibal has spun around him. With all his observational genius, Will does not see the things he does not wish to, no matter how his body cries for it. It happened with Abigail. Now it is happening with him.

He is blinded by vulnerability—Hannibal has known this from the start. But this time, his vulnerability reeks of something unclassified, something *other*. He cannot put a name to this. He does not want to.

“Okay.” Will breathes out the doubt. “Sorry about that. But I had to ask.”

“I understand.”

I forgive you. I accept you.

Hannibal knows this is callous, but it is necessary. Their time together, smothered beneath this veil of innocence—it is drawing to a close.

“Will.” Hannibal studies him, his brilliance. “Now that this is over, where will you live?”

A melancholy smile. “My house. Can’t stay at yours forever.”

It is an understandable decision, but it stings nonetheless.

“You will visit more often.”

Easy laughter pours from Will at his obstinacy. “Fair enough. I’ve warmed up to your house. But I need to get back to mine. My dogs, my space.”

“And what will you do with this new tranquility?”

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I thought catching this killer would make everything clearer. Now I see it hasn’t cleared up a thing.”

Will will go home, happiness in his heart but suspicion in his gut, webbing the crooks of his subconscious. Encephalitis sick, brain festering, and then in due time will come the revelation—the framing. A wordless confession, only to Will and only for Will, because there is no other option. Not after this. Not after he has unlocked this sacred part of his identity, come so close to unlocking Hannibal’s.

The primary reason why he will do this is because he is curious, as always. The others are to simultaneously confess to Will and neutralise him as a threat. It is impossible to predict how this will pan out. Hannibal can formulate ideas and create estimations but that is all they will ever be. Betrayal is an exceptional catalyst for rebirth. Shatter the old self, build the new from the rubble.

“Must everything be stripped of fog?” The words are slowly spoken, but coherent and clear. “What is the harm in a little obfuscation?”

Will leans in and rests his head on Hannibal’s shoulder. The angle is awkward and presses against their wounds, but Will doesn’t move. It is a shocking display of intimacy.

“What are *you* obfuscating?” he murmurs. “You’re cloaked in fog. I don’t know how to unravel you.”

It takes a moment to decode the words but they land magnificently. His stomach twists.

“What purpose does unravelling bring? One cannot unravel God, but He is worshipped nonetheless.”

“Are you comparing yourself to God?”

“I’m comparing our bond to faith,” he answers thickly. “Trust me, Will. Do not praise me or condemn me, but trust me. That is all I will ever ask of you.”

“I trust you.” The world trembles. “You’re the only person I trust right now. And I think you know that.”

Hannibal knows it is true. Will has caved inwards, completely susceptible to his wishes and whims. His, fully and wholly. An object of his creation.

“You saved me, Will.” He blinks through the opioid haze. “I could argue the same concept applies to you. My life was left solely in your hands. Our trust for one another should be celebrated.”

Will pauses. The sentiment settles deep into his frown, the curve of his lip.

“And how exactly,” he starts, “do you plan to celebrate that?”

What a question to ask. Hannibal falls silent in faux contemplation, the answer ripe and hot on his tongue. It is private humour, a joke Will may understand one day, but not now.

He looks up at Will with pure, pious conviction. Then he smiles.

“I’d say it’s near time for a dinner party.”

Chapter End Notes

and it's over!! writing this was amazing—i can't believe i stayed committed and actually finished... i hope you all enjoyed reading this as much as i enjoyed writing it!

in case anyone is curious, this fic starts very loosely at the end of 1x08 and slides back into the start of 1x09, the gap right before the whole abigail nick boyle mess happens :)

i appreciate all of the lovely comments—they seriously fueled me lmao. this was soso enjoyable to write... thank you so much for reading! <3

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